Male RVTs may be few in numbers, but they’re incredibly willing to share their RVT stories. Thanks to the many male RVTs who volunteered to talk to The RVT Journal for this article. We sat down with a diverse group of dudes to talk about how they got into a profession that traditionally attracts such a high percentage of females. We loved hearing about what keeps them growing — and thriving — in their contributions to animal health.

Checking on hospitalized patients, dispensing medications and drawing blood are just some of the daily tasks RVT Humza Mian enjoys performing on a daily basis. As the only RVT on staff at a Toronto-based small animal clinic, Mian says there are plenty of opportunities to learn.

“Surgery is my favourite part,” Mian says. “I work with an amazing vet who answers all my questions in a way that forces me to problem solve and grow as an RVT.”

Mian isn’t a vet, and he has no plans to return to school for the required seven years. He says he’s happy where he is. He’s a male working in a profession where his counterparts are overwhelmingly female, but gender has little to do with his job satisfaction.

“I feel like working with animals is looked at like a more feminine job if you were to classify things like that,” Mian says. “If men were to go into animal sciences the expectation is that they would need to be a vet.”

A recent survey by the Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians (OAVT) suggests male RVTs comprise less than one per cent of RVTs in Ontario. Conversely, 2015 data from the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) shows men make up nearly 46 per cent of the veterinarians in Canada.

Mian admits the “nursing” label often associated with RVTs might keep some men away. (Statistics Canada data suggests male nurses represent 10 per cent of that profession too.) Culturally, Mian says his family’s South Asian descent puts more value on studying and working in sciences.

The science label is what Mian chooses to highlight about the RVT profession. Four years ago, while attending Toronto’s Pride Parade, Mian says he noticed a lack of representation from any groups representing animal sciences. He worked with OAVT to organize an RVT presence, and this year he’s returning to the parade with full support from OAVT and like-minded RVTs. “In an event like Pride, it’s important to every part of society represented,” Mian says.

A place for traditional gender roles

RVTs of both genders are no strangers to the hard physical labour that comes with the job — but physical demands are particularly heavy in veterinary clinics that focus on food animals. RVT Taylor Hodgins works for an Ontario mobile food animal clinic.

“If you’re going to work with farm animals you need to be in top physical shape, and you have to be prepared for more workplace hazards,” says Hodgins. “There’s a lot more to restraining animals than RVTs experience in a dog and cat clinic. Sometimes you have to rope a 1,000-pound steer.”

Hodgins grew up on a beef and veal calf farm in Ontario. He says his family members always thought he would become a vet, but Hodgins shied away from university. He attended Ridgeway College’s veterinary technician program and found his way to an externship at his current clinic.

In addition to the physical demands of his job, Hodgins says being a male RVT at his current clinic is a bonus for another reason too: Much of his clinic’s clientele is comprised of Mennonite farmers who observe strict traditional gender roles.

“For clients who are set in old ways, women don’t have a lot to do with livestock,” says Hodgins. “When my clinic sent our female vet and female RVT to a farm, it was challenging for everyone.”

Hodgins says when he accompanies the clinic’s female veterinarian to a farm, male farmers often begin by addressing all questions to Hodgins. “I say, ‘I’m here to help — but you have to ask her your questions. She’s the one with the license.’ It seems like they respect her more now.”

Hodgins says he took some flack from guys in other programs at his school, but he never let it get to him. “I just told them they were jealous because I spent all day with their girlfriends,” he laughs.

Hodgins says he feels lucky to have landed a one-of-a-kind job. “I’ve always wanted a job like this,” he says.

The other side of the table

While the men who spoke to The RVT Journal generally feel valued in their current roles, accepting men as valued members of a veterinary team hasn’t always been easy. RVT Damon Thompson is a 23-year veteran in the field, and he says he encountered his share of opposition over the years, and was often told that as a man, he should find another profession, or go to veterinary school.

“I heard, ‘men don’t become techs.’ And ‘men don’t work as veterinary nurses,’” Thompson says. Thompson worked in small animal clinics for 20 years before growing his career ‘on the other side of the table’ as a pharmaceutical sales representative.

Thompson’s mother was a nurse, and he says he always wanted to work with animals. Of 52 students in his veterinary technician class, Thompson was one of two guys.

“Honestly I think that kind of talk drove me more to make a difference,” he says. “I’m very proud to be a male Registered Veterinary Technician.”

Today, Thompson says he has plenty of male coworkers, but only one is an RVT. He believes having RVT on his nametag gives him more credibility at the clinics he visits.
“My background and CE requirements, and clinical experience on the front lines mean I know the general flow of clinics on a day-to-day basis,” says Thompson. “I know the hot topics and I take that information into my calls with me. I think there’s an element of camaraderie that brings extra credibility to my work.”

Do men change workplace dynamics? Thompson says in a clinic setting where females dominate, a male personality can sometimes change things up.

“Competitiveness is different, and if there’s conflict, it may be easier for someone of the opposite gender to not choose a side,” he says. “But I think it comes down to individuals. I’m proud of the important work both male and female Registered Veterinary Technicians play in the human-animal bond.”

Searching for more balance

As an OAVT Director, Thompson is instrumental in helping to raise the profile of the RVT profession – something he says will go a long way in helping men and women think more seriously about RVT as a career path. But he says for anyone who is the sole income earner for a household, money will be an issue.

Wages are a key factor for many people in the sector, because it’s hard to support a family on an RVT salary, Thompson says. OAVT’s 2015 wage survey suggests the average wage of an Ontario RVT is still under $20 per hour. Respondents who had been working as an RVT for less than a year saw an average wage of just $15.50 per hour.

Part of the problem, suggests RVT Wes Harris, may be the visibility of RVTs. As a male looking to return to school after working in documentary filmmaking, Harris says he didn’t know what “veterinary technician” was when he first saw it listed as a course offering.

“Unlike many of my classmates, I didn’t volunteer in clinics in high school, and I didn’t even know this profession existed,” Harris says. “I must have met RVTs at the vet’s office before, but they were never clearly identified that way.”

Harris says he nearly signed up to study pharmacy technician before veterinary technician caught his eye. Harris notes that while pharmacy technician had important but predictable job choices, there was more opportunity for diversity as an RVT. With opportunities to work in research, clinic, shelter, sales and marketing and other areas, he opted for choice.

“I like animals, and working in a clinic setting was appealing,” Harris says. “The more I researched, the more I realized an RVT has a lot of scope.”

As a new RVT just entering the field, Harris says the “R” in RVT is valuable. “It’s super important to me that we are legislated,” Harris says. “There are only certain individuals who get to use the RVT name. Eventually, I think certification will be required, and it’s easier for me to get in now.”

Of the 60 students in Harris’ program, he says 53 were women.

“I feel like as a profession, increasing awareness will help attract more males to the program, because when it’s primarily women in the field, it seems logical that more women know about it,” Harris says. “Compassionate, caring fields are traditionally seen as more feminized, but I think it’s time we challenge why we do that.”