

Meet Creature Comforts, the startup that wants to transform veterinary care

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Daniel Attia and Russell Welsh, founders of Creature Comforts. The UK pet tech startup has raised £7M in seed funds to solve legacy problems in the veterinary industry, which is hampered by a lack of continuity of service, glitchy tech, inconsistent pricing, and operational inefficiencies, while vets struggle with unsustainable caseloads and chronic stress.

What was the catalyst for launching Creature Comforts?

[Daniel] Both of us had become acutely aware of the problems facing the veterinary sector – me as a pet owner and Russell as an industry insider with 23 years' experience. He's a vet surgeon and a former practice owner and I got two dogs during lockdown. Pet ownership had then hit record levels and I really struggled to get vet appointments. I had to sign up with six different practices to make sure my dogs could be seen.

[Russell] I think most pet owners would agree that vet care in the UK is excellent, when you can get an appointment. It's the rest of the service that's problematic. Follow up care may be non-existent, technology doesn't always work, repeat prescriptions have to be ordered over the phone, pricing is neither transparent nor consistent. In the UK market, corporate takeovers of independent vet clinics can result in cost stripping, and unhappy staff and customers. Six companies now own almost half of all veterinary practices in this country.

The other side of this is that vet teams are really stretched, overworked and burnt out. Despite the long route to get into a veterinary career, it's not one that encourages people to stay long term. There's very little flexibility or career progression, the hours are long and the costs of setting up a practice bar people from ownership.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

[Russell] The mission is to build a veterinary experience that benefits vet teams as much as pet owners. We've worked with experts to design a best-in-class clinic that keeps animals calm and has designated staff-only areas with plenty of space and natural light. Customers will be able to sign up to a monthly subscription model which includes unlimited consultations, annual vaccinations, and member rates for neutering, dental treatments and routine medications. We'll also have community events. Vet teams will benefit from a share of their clinic's profits, above industry-standard pay, compensated overtime, manageable working hours, and scheduled breaks.

Tell us about the working culture at Creature Comforts

[Russell] There's a genuine sense of belonging and ownership. This is how you get motivated, happy staff who are consistently progressing, rather than stagnating, and it ensures long-term stability for the business. It's really a stark contrast to working for corporate-owned practices in the veterinary sector where teams are usually very disconnected from head office.

[Daniel] Fluidity is critical. Departments and job roles shouldn't stifle anyone.

Every day our vets are collaborating with our tech team and our tech team are deep in the world of veterinary care. Everyone's opinion matters and fresh perspectives are how we do great work.

How are you funded?

[Daniel] *We've just raised £7M in a seed round co-led by Hanaco VC, Torch Capital and Boost Capital Partners.* We'll be using that money to design, open and staff our first two clinics. Our St John's Wood branch is due to open in early 2024, followed by another in a prime London location. It's also funding the development of an app to support 24/7 virtual care and customer queries. The app will let vets work flexibly and from home, while giving pet owners fast and unlimited access to expertise, including outside of normal opening hours.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

[Russell] Finding the right sites for our first two veterinary clinics. The speed of our business growth is dictated by our ability to find the right site at just the right time, so this is nothing like building a pure tech business. We're picky because we're trying to change the way vet practices look and feel, so we're avoiding the traditional, slightly dingy basement sites with limited square footage.

How does Creature Comforts answer an unmet need?

[Russell] The veterinary care experience is falling short, and work-life for vet staff is now in dire straits. Stress, empathy fatigue and mental health problems in the industry are all too common. Our business aims to meet the needs of staff as well as the needs of pet owners who deserve more transparency and a far better service.

What's in store for the future?

[Daniel] Keep expanding. Eventually we want to be providing our service to everyone who needs it across the UK.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

[Daniel] Startup life is harder than it looks! Make sure you raise capital from the right people if you need to. They should be people you trust and enjoy working with. Make sure you have a sustainable business model, not just a growth-based model but one that has real profitable unit economics.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

[Daniel] Like any good pet-owning human, we're beholden to our animals - Russell to his three-legged cat, his Dachshund and her recent litter of puppies, and I to my two dogs. Nala, our Bernese Mountain Dog, wants to be cuddled 24/7 and, despite weighing over 40kg, insists she's a lap dog. Enzo, our Silver Labrador, was particularly tricky to potty train, and was scared of everyone and everything thanks to lockdown. I spent weeks asking passing strangers to give him a treat, and he's now people-obsessed, so with his training complete I have a bit more time to spend with my wife!

Daniel Attia and Russell Welsh are the founders of *Creature Comforts*.