

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AN ANIMAL TECHNICIAN?

We spoke to Alex, a trainee technician to find out...

Hi Alex! Tell us what it is that you do in your job...

I am a trainee animal technician working at the Babraham Institute; my role involves checking the animals on a daily basis and cleaning out cages. I am also being trained so I can be licensed by the Home Office to carry out procedures... If I pass, I'll be able to start out with simple biopsies.

Other roles in my job include: general maintenance of the rooms, changing holding units, and reporting on animal health and welfare. I work in a GM-transgenic unit in a team of about eight technicians, so we all work together to make sure that everything gets done. It's brilliant, I love it.

How long have you worked as a trainee tech?

Just over 8 months. My probation ends at about 9 months and then I will become a qualified junior technician. Sometimes there is a 3 month extension if you haven't acquired all the required skills yet.

Did you work with animals before becoming an animal tech?

I have had some experience with animals before, I did work experience at a zoo in Wales, the education department of a wildfowl wetlands trust and as a grounds warden too, but this is my first full time job working with animals.



I was also an assistant animal technician when I was studying a BSc in zoology at Bangor University. That was more reptiles than mice. I then went on to do an MSc in Molecular Biology.

So, what encouraged you to become an animal technician?

I finished my Masters and was doing the obligatory job search when the Babraham role popped up. I love the area of Cambridge and I really wanted to work here, and I really love animals as well!

After doing so much academic research work, I really wanted to do a more practical job that was hands on and involved handling animals because I hadn't done that for quite a long time, being very lab based where I was.



What is your usual day to day routine?

The first thing we do is check over the animals in the morning, to make sure the environment is still optimal for the animals, that they're in good health and behaving as expected. I also prepare and serve up a mashed diet for the younger animals.

Next I check the welfare of the animals and then it's usually on to doing any cleaning out that needs to be done, sorting out and replying to any orders that need completing and communications from our scientists. I also change any holding units or air handlers – all the filters need to be done regularly.

Lastly, I take care of emails and close up at the end of the day. We have to do the final husbandry checks before leaving; making sure the animals are settled in for the night and have everything they need, checking everything is where it should be, cleaning the room, prepping all the equipment for the next day, and then it's usually time to go home.

Did you have any worries about animal research before you began your job?

I think the only worry I had was about culling mice; I wasn't sure how I would feel about that.

There's a lot of training to do, and you want to make sure you get it all right. But after that I was fine. I was always a supporter of

it beforehand but wasn't sure how I would personally feel about doing it. I guess, I'm glad the animals are being looked after by people like me that have been well trained and really want the animals to have the best welfare.

"I like to think the scientists do all the research, but really they couldn't function without us"

What do you love most about your job?

I like interacting with the animals but what I love most is that I learn something new every day. I work alongside a senior animal technician, so if there is ever something I need I can ask him, and there is always something, like a new mouse line I've not seen before. I'm also constantly learning new procedures during my training; soon I will be learning to do biopsies, injections and dissections.

Another part of the job that really interests me is working with other people's strains of mice. You get to see slightly different phenotypes and how those mice are being used for research.

"I just love learning something new every day!"

How has being a member of the IAT helped you?

I was at the IAT technician's conference which was really fun. A lot of the techs from Babraham came to UCL, we got to interact with a lot of the equipment manufacturers and lots of their animal techs too which was really interesting. It gave me a better insight into different aspects of the job and getting more information from manufacturers.

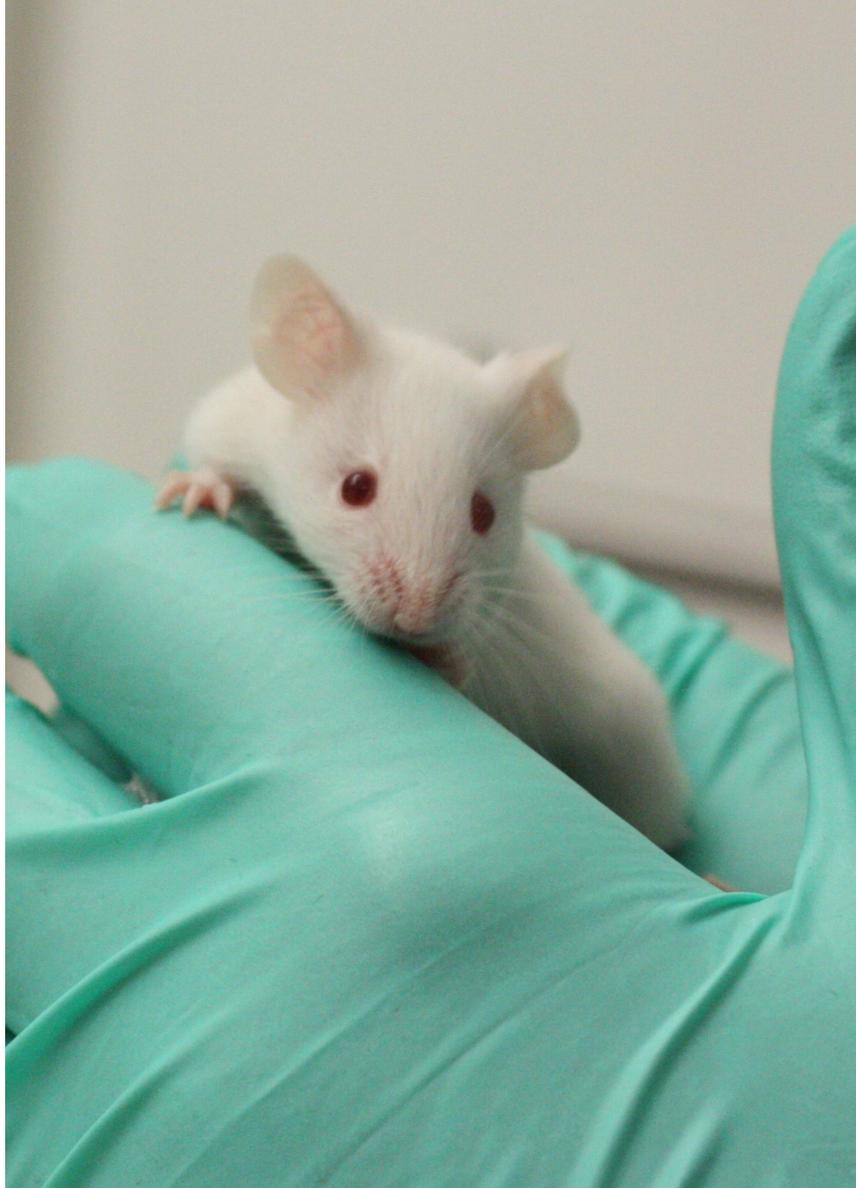
I think the IATs general resources, such as the newsletter, help me understand what's going on in the animal tech world on a bigger scale, across the country.

It's really good to know how techs help out with the research and all the different conferences you can go to and meet new people, helps give you a better understanding of the field as well.

What advice would you give to someone starting out as a technician?

I would say... It's probably not going to be what you expect and there is a lot involved but, you will learn a lot of new things very, very fast in this field.

You will probably gain a deeper respect for techs that provide animals for research, on how big of a scale and appreciate the size of the company you work within. I just say, enjoy it and learn as much as possible, that's the best way to get on with it and how you will become a better tech in the end.



And lastly, do you find animal technology rewarding?

Yes! I like the idea that the animals we're rearing and the strains we're providing to the scientists will then go on to develop treatments for some of the biggest diseases in the country such as cancer. My researchers are currently investigating the actions of proteins within cells of the immune system, and how these proteins could be targeted by drugs to allow our own immune system to fight cancerous cells.

It is really rewarding to know that you are contributing to such important research.

Thank you Alex for giving us an insight into the world of a trainee technician, we wish you all the best in your career!