Train Staff on Proper Handling of Animals  
By CVMA Insurance Services

Proper restraint and handling of animals at a veterinary practice is extremely important to the safety of veterinary staff, clients and animals.

Each day employees in a veterinary hospital are at risk for injuries from bites and scratches that can disrupt the practice and increase insurance costs. When handling animals, staff should always expect the unexpected. Unfortunately, animal behavior is not predictable and can include sudden movements. A normally docile animal can become aggressive due to fear, pain, territorial responses, possessiveness, irritability, drugs, or neurological problems.

The majority of injuries in a veterinary practice are caused directly through contact with animals. That’s why animal handling techniques should be taught to veterinary staff and used consistently by everyone in a veterinary hospital.

How to Avoid Incidents with Animals

There are a number of steps that can be taken to reduce the possibility of incidents with animals, including training staff, assessing animals, approaching animals properly, avoiding startling animals, and eliminating distractions.

Train all staff in appropriate techniques for approaching and handling animals and document that training. An excellent resource is the Bite and Scratch online safety training course available to Fireman’s Fund® workers compensation policyholders when brokered by Veterinary Insurance Services Company (VISC) (www.visc-ins.com).

Assess the animal before handling it – talk to the owner about its temperament and observe the animal for signs of aggression. Veterinary staff should watch for warning signs of animal aggressiveness and fear. These vary with animal breeds, but may include raised fur, flattened ears, twitching tails, low growling or hissing, skittishness, or bared teeth.

Approach all animals with caution, after assessing their likely behavior. Use slow and deliberate movements so as not to startle the animal. Approach animals from their front and avoid any blind spots. Be calm, confident and attentive and be sure you have the animal’s attention. Avoid prolonged eye contact. Never corner an animal.

Avoid startling an animal. Sudden movements, loud noises and unusual odors may cause an animal to react. For example, staff may enjoy listening to music in the workplace, but to a scared animal, the extra noise may cause stress. New smells, other animals and new people handling them may stress animals in the clinical setting.

Eliminate any distractions. Focus on the task at hand – handling an animal – rather than trying to do several things at once.

Hospital Policies and Procedures

In addition to taking the above steps to avoid incidents with animals, practice owners should develop hospital policies and procedures, which should include:

Do not allow inexperienced staff to handle animals without assistance or before they have been properly trained. If a staff member is unsure about the likely behavior of an animal, they should leave it to more experienced workers to approach and handle.
Use appropriate restraint techniques based on an animal’s species, temperament, age and welfare, as well as the need to protect the safety of staff and observers. Cat restraints, for example, include muzzles, bags, and towels. For dogs, restraints include muzzles and short leashes. Staff should receive training on the restraint positions for cats and dogs in connection with performing specific procedures. Chemical restraints should be considered if procedures cannot be completed using established humane restraint techniques.

Do not allow owners to restrain animals. The most common lawsuit filed against small animal practitioners is by owners bitten by their own dogs. For all procedures, even those that are mildly invasive, like taking temperatures, use staff to restrain animals.

Follow your hospital’s standard first aid practices if a bite or scratch does occur, per your hospital’s policies and procedures manual. Procedures to be followed will include immediately washing the wound thoroughly with soap and water plus an antiseptic, consulting your physician, reporting the bite to your supervisor (who will call the VISC/NT 24 triage nurse if your practice has arranged for this), notifying your workers’ compensation insurance carrier, and reporting the incident to the agency that handles rabies control in your area.

Bites, scratches and other injuries can be prevented through knowledge and training, use of proper handling techniques, and use of proper personal protective equipment. Exercising caution and using common sense will also contribute to safe handling of animals in a veterinary hospital.