

Animal Handling

As veterinarians, we deal with animals that are unwell or undergoing aversive procedures. This means that we need to have skills beyond those of personnel dealing only with healthy animals.

Occupational health and safety

Any animal handling comes with a risk of animal-related injury. A survey of injury among Australian veterinarians reported that 51% of respondents had sustained a significant work-related injury (that is, an injury requiring hospitalisation or the practitioner not being able to work at the usual pace for greater than or equal to 5 days).¹ [Most cattle-related injuries](#) occurred in stock or handling yards (82%) and when the veterinarian was kicked or struck, pushed upon or stepped on (80% of reported injuries).² Only 62% of practitioners reported using any safety precaution at the time of the injury.² Equine practice is reported to be associated with high rates of injury worldwide, with 7% of injuries reported in a [UK study](#) of equine veterinarians resulting in affected practitioners losing consciousness.³ As with cattle veterinarians, [most injuries](#) to equine veterinarians occurred in stock or handling yards and open paddocks while fewer occurred in stables.³ Bites and scratches were the most common injury reported in small and mixed animal practice, with 48% of respondents in an Australian study reporting a dog bite and 67% of respondents reporting a cat bite or scratch in the previous 12-month period.¹

All veterinarians know that animals can [react to being handled in a way that compromises workplace health and safety](#). The way an animal reacts can be intensified by the veterinary hospital setting, which may be novel to the patient, expose them to unusual sights, smells and sounds and/ or require confinement that they are not used to, whether that be physical restraint, hospital cages, small yards or crushes in the case of large animals.

The way in which animals are handled during veterinary practice contributes to the risks and hazards in the workplace. By its nature, veterinary practice often involves handling animals that are unwell, in pain and /or fearful. The handling required for veterinary assessments, treatments and procedures can be unpleasant or painful for the animal. Further, the animal may have had a previous negative experience involving a veterinarian and become fearful as a result.⁸ All of these associations can make our patients more likely to react badly when they detect veterinary personnel and can easily outweigh good associations that may have been established e.g., through non-invasive encounters such as puppy classes.

One Welfare

As set out by Colonius and Earley (2013), “the veterinary profession is driven toward promoting human well-being alongside animal well-being”.⁷ The Board has embraced a One Welfare approach in its current strategic plan. Whilst the One Welfare principles probably include more expansive topics than the current article can cover, One Welfare principles are intrinsic to the way in which veterinarians handle their patients.

Veterinarians are required by law to have a primary concern for animal welfare. The safe handling of animals is critically important to the physical well-being of both veterinarians and their patients. More recently, there has been a stronger focus on the emotional safety of animal patients in the veterinary context. For example, in feline patients, “moderating the impact that non-physical interactions (e.g., visual, auditory, olfactory) have on the cat is equally as important as considering interactions involving physical contact”.

Veterinary environments are known to be stressful for animals.⁸ The stress associated with veterinary care has been cited as a major concern both for owners and veterinarians.⁸ This finding reflects studies report that “the human/dog dyad has been shown to be analogous to parent-child attachments”.¹⁰ Most carers disagree with the use of heavy handling for their cats.¹³

It is hard to justify the continued use of some traditional forms of animal handling. For example, it is known that “scolding, punishing and physical reprimand are known to increase anxiety, fear and aggression in dogs.”⁹ Sometimes the shock of being treated harshly serves to distract animals giving personnel the impression that the animals are showing “respect”. This is particularly evident in horse handling. For example, the use of an ear twitch immobilizes the animal through fear and/or pain and should be avoided where possible or used only transiently.^{10,11,12} Use of a nose twitch for short periods (< 5 minutes) is preferable to ear twitching where chemical restraint is not available or if used to facilitate administration of chemical restraint.^{10,12} Twitching of the skin of the neck to facilitate the administration of chemical restraint in fearful horses may be as distracting as nose twitching¹² and may be less provocative to horses that have experienced the pain associated with nose twitching. Correct handling can lower reactivity in horses, and we should remember that horses learn quickly from aversive events.¹²

Like horses, minimal restraint is more effective and efficient when handling cats.^{12,13} As such, ‘scruffing’ is another handling method that requires reconsideration. Cats show signs of fear during episodes of heavy handling, including scruffing.¹³ Like the use of twitches for horses, heavy restraint compromises welfare in the short term and is likely to lead to aversion to such handling in the longer term.¹³

Whilst not specifically involving twitching or scruffing, the Board has observed an increase in complaints about how fearful animals (particularly dogs and horses) have been handled by veterinarians. So, we feel it is important to issue the following advice to practitioners.

Protocols and procedures

There are both work, health and safety and animal welfare benefits to appropriate animal handling.

On this basis, the Board believes that employers, persons carrying on a business or undertaking (PCBU) and the self-employed should consider creating and implementing formal protocols and procedures for animal handling in their veterinary practices.

Risk assessment should form part of these protocols and procedures. Staff training is integral to risk management. A veterinarian’s animal handling skills and ability to assess patient demeanour will affect the degree of both physical and emotional risk associated with handling a patient.

Veterinarians should also ensure that, where required, they involve trained and skilled assistants to support them with patient care, both for small and large animals. In some species, like dogs, the presence of the client can reduce stress as dogs seek information or reassurance from their owners. We acknowledge that negative interactions by clients with their dogs can increase anxiety in these patients. Veterinarians should consider species factors such as this when deciding how to conduct their consultations and consider both physical and emotional safety in their decision making.^{8,9}

When a veterinarian has safety concerns or it is required for the emotional well-being of their patient, planning the use of chemical restraint should be considered early and not as a last resort.⁵ Training dogs to accept muzzles before they present to the clinic makes them safer candidates for chemical restraint. Coaching clients on how to train dogs to accept muzzles can also be justified because it may facilitate home care such as bandage changes. They can be assured that that time spent habituating their animals to veterinary triggers such as muzzles is time well spent.

Veterinarians should inspect their surroundings for safety hazards and ensure that they have access to appropriate equipment and enclosures (yards, crushes etc.) before attempting to treat patients, especially those displaying behaviour that could be dangerous.⁶ The AVA's Veterinary Business Special Interest Group has created "WHS Guidelines: Animal Handling", which are available to its members.⁵ These provide an extensive guide as to how to manage safety relating to animal handling in veterinary settings.

Low-stress/ fear-free animal handling

Bites and scratches are the most widely reported animal-related injuries in the available literature, likely reflecting that most veterinarians work in companion animal practice. The incidence of these types of injuries and others, such as kick and crush injuries, can be reduced through implementation of low-stress (or so-called fear-free) handling techniques (LS/FF handling).

The American Animal Hospital Association ([AAHA](#)) explains that LS/FF handling techniques enhance "efficiency, increase client perceptions of compassion, increase client retention, and vastly improve the quality of patient care".⁴ AAHA maintains that calmer patients reduce risks to the veterinary team.

Many LS/FF handling programs are now available for implementation in Australian veterinary hospitals by veterinary practitioners. They work best when all members of the team, from receptionists, nurses to practice managers are trained. Many resources offer online training for all veterinary staff, making them accessible and cost-effective for veterinarians to upskill themselves and their teams in LS/FF handling techniques for both small and large animals. Most programs address practice set-up, equipment, training of support staff as well as veterinary-specific modules. There is also an increasing number of species-specific literature available for reference, some of which are listed below.

Beyond formal handling programs, veterinarians are encouraged to take time to refresh their knowledge of species-specific body language and behaviour. Reading and responding to body language cues displayed by patients may avoid animals having to escalate to behaviour that could be potentially dangerous.

Punishment must not be used in the veterinary context.⁹ Punishment is:

- a. rarely humane
- b. usually does harm
- c. does not meet any standard of care and
- d. is not a service that veterinarians are trained or qualified to deliver.

Punishment is not easy to deliver without side effects including developing a fear of veterinarians and associated veterinary triggers.

Boundaries

The Board has identified a concerning trend, where veterinarians compromise their own safety or the safety of those around them to meet client demands.

Boundary setting and clear communication with clients may help ease the pressure placed on veterinarians by clients to meet their demands, which may be unrealistic or dangerous. The Board recognizes that veterinarians may feel pressure to complete a task requested by a client, resulting in detriment to the patient and often, the veterinarian as well. The current uptick in related complaints will be arrested only when veterinarians focus on patient well-being and personnel safety, rather than task achievement.

The Board also reminds practitioners of available support services, such as the free [Doctors Health Advisory Service](#). The Board also has a trained counsellor on staff who is available to discuss concerns about such pressures with veterinarians.

RESOURCE LIST

Some examples of guidelines and advice about animal handling can be found below. We note that some resources will require journal access:

- A. AAHA, 2015, 'Behaviour Management Guidelines', available [here](#) and [here](#)
- B. AVA Veterinary Business Group, 'WHS Animal Handling Guidelines', available to AVA Veterinary Business Group members from www.ava.com.au
- C. Carroll, Sykes and Mills, 2023, 'Moving toward Fear-Free Husbandry and Veterinary Care for Horses', *Animals*, 12(21), 2907, available [here](#)
- D. Doherty, McGreevy and Pearson, 2017, 'The importance of learning theory and equitation science to the veterinarian', *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 190, 111-112, available [here](#)
- E. Grandin, 'Behavioral Principles of Livestock Handling', available [here](#)
- F. Grandin, 2015, 'How to improve livestock handling and reduce stress', available [here](#)
- G. ISFM/AAFP, 2022, Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines, available [here](#)
- H. Fear Free Academy, www.fearfree.com
- I. Reiner, Heritier, Windschnurnur, Pratsch, Arhant and Affenzeller, 2023, 'A Review on Mitigating Fear and Aggression in Dogs and Cats in a Veterinary Setting', *Animals*, 11(1), 159, available [here](#)

REFERENCE LIST

1. Fritschi, Day, Shirangi, Robertson, Lucas and Vizard, 2006, 'Injury in Australian veterinarians', *Occupational Medicine*, 56, 199-203, available [here](#)
2. Lucas, Day and Fritschi, 2012, 'Serious injuries to Australian veterinarians working with cattle' *Australian Veterinary Journal*, 91, 57-60, available [here](#)
3. Lucas, Day and Fritschi, 2009, 'Injuries to Australian veterinarians working with horses', *The Veterinary Record*, 164, 207-209, available [here](#)
4. AAHA, 2015, 'Behaviour Management Guidelines', available [here](#) and [here](#)
5. AVA Veterinary Business Group, 'WHS Animal Handling Guidelines', available to AVA Veterinary Business Group members from www.ava.com.au
6. Epp and Waldner, 2012, 'Occupational health hazards in veterinary medicine: physical, psychological and chemical hazards', *Canadian Veterinary Journal*, 53, 151-157, available [here](#)
7. Colonius and Earley, 2013, 'One welfare: a call to develop a broader framework of thought and action', *JAVMA*, 242, 309-310
8. Girault, Priymenko, Helsy, Duranton and Gaunet, 2022, 'Dog behaviours in veterinary consultations: Part 1. Effect of the owner's presence or absence', *The Veterinary Journal*, 280, 105788, available [here](#)
9. Helsy, Priymenko, Girault, Duranton and Gaunet, 2022, 'Dog behaviours in veterinary consultations: Part II. The relationship between the behaviours of dogs and their owners', *The Veterinary Journal*, 281, 105789, available [here](#)
10. Flackoll, Ali and Saab, 2017, 'Twitching in veterinary procedures: how does this technique subdue horses?', *The Journal of Veterinary Behaviour*, 18, 23-28, available [here](#)
11. Vilian Rorvang, Nielson and McLean, 2020, 'Sensory abilities of horses and their importance for equitation science', *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, 7, 633, available [here](#)
12. McGreevy, Winther Christensen, Konig von Borstol and McLean, 2018, 'Handling and Transport', *Equitation Science*, Wiley Blackwell
13. ISFM/AAFP, 2022, 'Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines', available [here](#)