Lesson Learned – Safe Handling of Large Patients

Ideally, no injuries would ever happen at the workplace. However, most professions involve some exposure to work-related injuries and the veterinary profession is no exception, having its own unique set of hazards. These include laceration injuries from handling sharp tools and instruments, bite and scratch injuries, slip and fall injuries from wet surfaces, and strain injuries from lifting heavy bags of food and heavy patients, just to name a few. Understanding the risk factors involved with each type of injury can help reduce the occurrence of each.

Let's examine a scenario based on a real accident in a veterinary practice and determine if it could have been prevented.

Sandy and the 60-Pound Mistake

Sandy recently started at the Animal Care Clinic as a veterinary technician. When Sandy saw Rocky—an energetic two-year-old Belgian Malinois—burst into the waiting room, pulling his owner in his wake, she knew he was going to be a handful. Sandy led Rocky into the exam room and got him on the scale with some cajoling. After recording his weight at 60.5 pounds, Sandy decided to put him on the exam table. Rocky had calmed down since entering the room and Sandy felt confident she could lift him onto the table. After all, she had recently lifted moving boxes at home that weighed at least that amount. Sandy bent down and wrapped one arm around Rocky's chest and the other arm behind his hind legs. As she began the lift, Rocky suddenly startled and began squirming violently, forcing Sandy to grip him tighter and set him back down.

Immediately, Sandy felt a sharp pain in her right shoulder, which radiated into her arm and up her neck. Over the next few days, the pain increased and extended into her back. Sandy was barely able to lift her arm due to sharp pain.

What started as an initial visit to her primary care provider turned into three years of many doctor visits, tests, physical therapy sessions, and steroid injections to the shoulder and neck. It was determined that surgery was unlikely to help.

Aside from the costs associated with this injury, Sandy suffered over three years from this accident. Her injury affected nearly all facets of her life. With limited and painful use of her shoulder, she had to modify her work duties, had trouble lifting her young daughter, and was unable to do many of the activities she had enjoyed in the past.

Learning from Sandy's Mistake

Because lifting injuries in veterinary practices are common, it is important to analyze this type of accident and learn from it. First, realize that lifting an animal is far different than lifting an object such as a box. An animal's sudden and unpredictable movement can cause you to move in unexpected ways to keep control, causing strains and sprains. Even lifting heavy bags of pet food, which can shift when moved, can pose an increased risk of injury.

While lifting patients is often a necessary part of the job, most injuries in veterinary practices can be prevented or mitigated by using various methods of engineering and administrative controls.

Engineering controls involve a change in the physical features of the workplace to remove the hazard. Examples of engineering controls used to minimize the risk of lifting injuries include:

- Lift tables
- Ramps
- Stairs
- Examination rooms and baths designed for large dogs
- Shower stalls to bathe large animals at floor level

Administrative controls are workplace policies, procedures, and practices for employees to follow to minimize the risk of injury. Examples of applicable administrative controls include:

- Training staff to use good lifting mechanics with an emphasis on lifting animals
- Establishing a weight limit for lifting animals alone, e.g., require team lifts for any large animal that weighs more than 40 pounds
- Storing large or heavy items (such as large bags of pet food) between hip and shoulder height

Sandy's accident could likely have been avoided had she employed some of the engineering controls above, such as a lift table, a ramp, or stairs to get Rocky onto the table. Even if such tools were not available, had Sandy used a colleague for a team lift and used proper lifting techniques, the chances of injury would have been minimized.

Staff should be encouraged to recognize potential injury exposures throughout the practice and to work with supervisors to create solutions. Working as a team and using proper engineering and administrative controls can keep your practice staff safe, healthy, and productive.

Be safe out there. Your good health and welfare matter to us. ■