

## **BASICS**

### **Overview**

- \$ The purpose of an emergency plan is to increase safety for staff, clients, and pets.
- \$ Emergency plans are for situations that hopefully never occur. The possibility of emergencies, however, necessitates preparation.
- \$ Depending on the part of the country where the facility is located, natural emergencies will vary from rarities, like in the Northeast, to relatively common occurrences, like in the Midwest and West.
- \$ Facilities in high-risk areas for floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and/or earthquakes should prepare a specific plan for each of these possibilities.
- \$ Other types of emergencies, including fires, robberies, loose vicious animals, or toxic contamination, can happen anywhere and account for the majority of emergencies in the veterinary field. All practices should prepare a specific plan for each possibility.
- \$ When emergency plans are needed, they should be in multiple copies that are easily accessible, well discussed by the staff, and frequently practiced; then, during the event, the plan will be much more likely to be perfectly executed. If this is not the case, people and/or animals could sustain injury or loss of life.
- \$ Not only does staff education prior to an emergency help when it comes time to handle one, it can also help prevent emergencies, such as toxic spills.

### **Terms Defined**

- \$ **Emergency.** A situation out of the ordinary that requires immediate attention to ensure safety and minimize loss of life.
- \$ **Natural disaster.** An emergency that is created by a natural event. Examples include tornados and earthquakes.
- \$ **Spill kit.** A kit that can be purchased or self-made. Consists of items that will assist in containing and cleaning a toxic spill. These usually include a couple of pairs of latex gloves, protective eyewear, large plastic container (many facilities will use a litter tray, but this is usually too small) that is able to hold between 5-6 gallons of liquid, multiple thick and durable plastic bags, something to close the plastic bags (ties or tape), a dust broom and pan, and laminated instructions for use in the event of a spill.
- \$ **Toxic substance.** A material that has the property of causing damage to normal tissue. Chemicals, for example, can cause severe burns, while radioactive materials can cause tissue death.
- \$ **Veterinary Medical Assistance Teams (VMAT).** Teams of veterinarians, technicians, and support personnel brought together through the AVMA, who are ready at all times to provide aid in the event of a disaster.

## **OPTIONS AND ISSUES**

### **General Requirements**

- \$ Regardless of the type of emergency a facility has to handle, the most important factor is having a well thought-out plan and practiced implementation and evacuation procedures.
- \$ There should be a list of emergency phone numbers posted next to each telephone. One or more staff members should be designated to call these numbers if necessary.
- \$ All facilities should have a central alarm system for fire and smoke detection; it is simple to include window and door coverage (in case of an attempted robbery) as well. The system should be connected to a 24-hour monitoring agency, which will contact the local police or fire company in the event of an emergency.
- \$ Insurance companies recognize the importance of central alarm systems, and will give substantial monetary discounts to facilities that install them.
- \$ All staff members should know how to activate the central alarm system. This will need to be done in certain cases: it is superfluous in natural emergencies, but can be helpful in a fire or robbery.
- \$ There is no way to prevent a natural disaster, but being prepared for one can be the difference between life and death. Consult with the county's emergency management agency for advice on your responsibilities and emergency plans.
- \$ The location of a self-aid box or container should be explained to all staff members in a meeting, during which the contents are examined and explained.
- \$ If your facility has a real first-aid kit, OSHA requires that anyone who might need to use it is trained to do so, including the standard blood borne pathogen information. Training can be done through the local fire department or at the Red Cross.
- \$ Keep records of any and all training that staff members receive, as well as an attendance list.

### **Exits and Evacuation**

- \$ Each facility should have a floor plan showing the quickest routes to all available exits posted in multiple locations. At the least, there should be one per room. It is also helpful to note the location of fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, danger areas (such as places where compressed gas is kept), and electrical control boxes (in case they need to be shut off).
- \$ Not only do exits need to be marked on floor plans, they should be identified with lighted signs. Hallways going towards these exits must have markings or arrows pointing the way out.
- \$ All emergency evacuation plans should state a central meeting place, located outside.
- \$ In areas that might be hit by hurricanes or tornadoes, all staff should know the location and best route to a nearby secure shelter.
- \$ Once or twice a year, practice drills should be performed by the staff, so all members understand the specifics of evacuation plans. Once a year, a staff meeting should be dedicated to discussing how people should behave and react to various types of emergencies: a person's reaction to an earthquake will be quite different from his or her reaction to a robbery.

## **Fires**

- \$ Each fire extinguisher needs to be visible and kept in locations detailed by the local municipality fire code. All staff members should be well versed in the use of different types of fire extinguishers.
- \$ Fire extinguishers can be filled with carbon dioxide, dry chemicals, halon, or water.
- \$ Carbon dioxide extinguishers are most effective on Class B and C fires (liquid and electrical fires). Since the gas disperses quickly, these extinguishers are only effective from 3 to 8 feet.
- \$ Dry chemical extinguishers are rated for multiple purpose use. They contain an extinguishing agent and use a compressed, non-flammable gas as a propellant.
- \$ Halon extinguishers contain a gas that interrupts the chemical reaction that takes place when fuels burn. These types of extinguishers are often used to protect valuable electrical equipment, since they leave no residue to clean up.
- \$ Water extinguishers contain water and compressed gas. They should only be used on Class A fires (ordinary combustibles fires).
- \$ All staff should be aware of all flammable items in the facility (O<sub>2</sub> cylinders, ether, anesthetic gases) and their locations.
- \$ Practice fire drills are a good way for the staff to discuss and understand their individual roles.
- \$ Staff must understand that the primary rule is for them to evacuate the building as quickly and calmly as is possible.

## **Toxic Spills**

- \$ Staff members need to know which substances used are toxic or potentially toxic.
- \$ One staff meeting per year should be dedicated to discussing the different chemicals present in the facility. Many of the drugs and chemicals used on a daily basis, such as laundry detergent or bleach, are not perceived as toxic and thus would not be handled correctly in an emergency.
- \$ Practice drills for toxic spills and/or contamination will teach staff where spill kits are and how to use them.
- \$ Staff should understand that not only can toxic spills be dangerous to touch, but also that their odors can be harmful
- \$ Emergency shower and eyewash stations should be located next to places where toxic materials are most likely to spill. It is also vital that staff know how to use these devices.
- \$ If a faucet mounted eyewash station is used, the hot water handle must be extremely easy to distinguish from the cold water one, as in an emergency it would be easy to scald one's eyes. (Water used for flushing out eyes should be tepid or lukewarm.)
- \$ The stations must be able to provide water for fifteen minutes.

## **The AVMA and Disasters**

- \$ The AVMA has developed VMATS. These are groups of 2 veterinarians, 4 veterinary technicians, and 2-4 support personnel to be a part of a federal emergency disaster preparedness program.

- \$ These teams can set up treatment facilities where needed and supply veterinary medical care 24 hours/day. The units are highly mobile, are usually deployed within 24-48 hours, and have enough supplies to last three days.
- \$ In a disaster, VMATs will move in and set up field hospitals to provide triage and immediate care.
- \$ The AVMA will reimburse any veterinarian who treats animals injured in disasters and has brochures available for disaster preparation.

## **CAUTIONS**

- \$ Chemotherapeutic drugs can be highly toxic, and veterinary staff should receive extra training on these substances. It is easy to forget that even after treatment, animal waste products can be dangerous to a human well-being.
- \$ If a facility handles highly radioactive materials, the SS should be sure to study up on storage, use, and emergency procedures. These substances are dangerous even when one doesn't come into direct contact with them.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

### **Abbreviations**

- \$ VMAT: Veterinary Medical Assistance Team.
- \$ SS: Safety Supervisor.

### **Recommended Reading**

- \$ AVMA Homepage. 1996. Available at [www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org). Accessed June 1, 2004. Provides literature on disaster plans and VMAT.
- \$ Federal Emergency Management Agency. 2004. Available at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov). Accessed June 3, 2004. Disaster Impact Helpline: (800) 462-9029.
- \$ Harris, Tom. How Stuff Works. 1998. Available at [www.home.howstuffworks.com/fire-extinguisher.htm](http://www.home.howstuffworks.com/fire-extinguisher.htm). Accessed June 14, 2004. How to use a fire extinguisher.
- \$ Seibert, PJ. Spill Clean-Up. 2002. Available at [www.v-p-c.com/phil/osha/spillcleanup.htm](http://www.v-p-c.com/phil/osha/spillcleanup.htm). Accessed June 4, 2004. Information on spill kits and how to use them.

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