

Dr Vivienne Jones

# WHAT TO EXPECT

## When a staff member is expecting

Congratulations, you're pregnant! Well really one of your staff members is, but when navigating this journey in the veterinary setting, it can feel like a joint effort. This is an exciting time for your staff member but may seem daunting, threatening to add more work to you and your already busy schedule as an employer and in most cases practice owner and perhaps even manager too! Whew, you already have enough on your plate. How do you navigate pregnancy and the impending maternity leave?

Remember that whatever decisions and choices you make in the next eighteen months or so and beyond will affect not only your employee but their child and perhaps even their career. This can be a tough time for everyone in the workplace, but it does not have to be overwhelming.

As an employer in the veterinary field, you will need to familiarize yourselves with the workplace human rights guidelines as well as the special safety precautions that you must all take to ensure the arrival of a happy and healthy bouncing bundle of joy!

Employers should be aware of the inherent and special risks that a veterinary workplace poses for pregnant staff and measures should be taken to accommodate those. A vet clinic can be a safe working environment for a pregnant woman if she is made aware of the hazards and risks inherent in a veterinary hospital setting and provided that proper work practices for minimizing exposure and risks are adopted. There are four categories of health hazards commonly found in vet-

erinary practices that employers should pay particular attention to and ensure that adequate safety measures are taken in all areas: physical plant/scheduling, chemical, radiological and biological:

### **(1) Physical plant and scheduling**

Employers would be wise to consider accommodations for protecting the health and safety of the expectant mother and the child. Be sure that your staff are not subjected to extremes of temperature (where possible), that adequate access to bathroom and hydration facilities are provided, and that safety in the facility is assured and followed. Check to make sure your clinic provides your staff with comfortable seating and that anti-fatigue mats are placed in surgery, etc. Ensure floors are not slippery. The staff member must avoid climbing on ladders or into the backs of tall vehicles, and must take scheduled breaks to allow her to rest her feet and eat.

Position yourself and your hospital in such a way so as to try and ensure a problem free pregnancy; discuss what changes you

anticipate with your employee in an open and non-confrontational way to ensure that scheduling, time constraints and any special needs, like doctor's appointments, are met. The reward will be a happy employee with a better chance of having an uncomplicated pregnancy which will generate loyalty and gratitude in spades!

### **(2) Chemical**

Employers should ensure that ALL staff are trained in WHIMIS and are able to read and understand medical and chemical data safety sheets, whether pregnant or not! Provide employees with a list of off-limits chemicals (eg formaldehyde, chemotherapy drugs, inhalant anesthetics, pesticides such as Advantix and hormones) known to cause birth defects or spontaneous abortions and then do NOT allow the pregnant staff member to use or even handle these products. In addition, ensure and provide adequate ventilation when these products are used by another staff member or do so in a separate area from where the pregnant staff member spends their time. One idea is to formalize samples outside of the building-

a great way to avoid headaches for all staff members and it takes only a few minutes at minus twenty- perhaps even less!

Any spills within the facility must be contained and removed as per safety data sheets, plus the pregnant staff member should be notified and removed from the affected area until it is deemed safe for her return. Ensure that anesthetic gases are ventilated properly through well maintained scavenging systems and perform leak tests on anesthetic circuits prior to/after use. Proper precautions like wearing rubber gloves and handwashing should be emphasized when handling laboratory reagents or medical slide stains and specimens. Again, we should all do this!

### **(3) Radiological**

NEVER allow your pregnant staff member to restrain an animal when obtaining radiographs- NEVER! Some employee manuals will allow the pregnant staff member to perform such duties provided they wear gowns, gloves and a monitoring badge. As an employer all measures should be taken to provide alter-

natives to this. Badge monitoring is every 3 months and is of course after the fact notification of excessive exposure. Better to play safe!

#### **(4) Biological**

The pregnant employee must always be conscious of her environment, patients' temperaments and health status as well as any suspected disease differentials that pose a risk to her unborn child and ask for assistance when handling such cases or specimens. Pregnant staff members should wear gloves when cleaning, doing lab work with feces, urine or body fluids and when examining, bathing or handling animals with skin disease. Discuss diseases such as rabies and tetanus with staff before they are pregnant to ensure adequate vaccination. Be aware of potential risks such as listeriosis, salmonellosis, brucellosis, leptospirosis and chlamydia and ensure you have a plan in place for handling such cases (of course depending on prevalence and presence of such threats in your geographic area).

For fractious pets or livestock have a protocol for handling these patients to minimize the chances of a bite or physical injury to the staff member. Do NOT let pregnant staff members handle these situations without adequate support and safety measures; you may leave yourself liable and have a devastating situation to deal with. Toxoplasmosis can be tested for before becoming pregnant to know whether additional precautions (rubber gloves and hand washing) or accommodations are needed when handling cats' litterboxes and feces; again encourage female staff members to discuss whether advance testing is appropriate for them with their family physician. Dermatophytoses such as ringworm can affect the immunosuppressed individual and suspect cases should be handled by other staff members as severe infections needing systemic treatments could be

harmful to the developing fetus.

Wow... no sooner have you adjusted protocols to accommodate a safe pregnancy than now you need to know what the rules and responsibilities are for both parties involved in a maternity leave. Always you are best to refer to the provincial labour laws. Here is a brief synopsis of labour laws around maternity in Saskatchewan:

Maternity and parental leaves are governed by each provincial government and in Saskatchewan basically entitle employees who have worked for "at least 20 weeks in the 52 weeks before the day the leave is to begin" in either a full or part time capacity and who are currently employed and working, to 18 consecutive weeks of unpaid maternity leave and 34 consecutive weeks of unpaid leave beginning after the end of the 18 week maternity leave. Unemployment insurance provides you with pay as a proportion of your salary during this time. Employers should be aware that if pregnancy is interfering with an employee's job performance or duties that you may require your employee to start their leave up to 13 weeks before the estimated due date, only if the duties cannot be modified or you cannot be reassigned to another job (be aware that there cannot be a loss of wages or benefits with a job re-assignment). Employers must receive a written letter from the employee as well as a doctor's note with the estimated delivery date at least 4 weeks prior to the anticipated leave. An employer is "not required" to allow an employee to return to work until they have received a written notice of return to work at least 4 weeks prior to the anticipated return to work date.

And the fun continues... now your best employee is leaving you in the lurch for twelve months with what appears to be only a vague promise to return to work after that. How will you replace that employee? Now you

have to train a new staff member. Before you despair, remember to look for that silver lining (just like in the movies!). Think of maternity leave as a great way to meet new staff who may fit into your workplace well and bring new ideas and new skills to the table. The "temporary" vet or tech may bring surgical prowess to your facility and expand your services boosting your bottom line. They may come with a rehab laser or acupuncture needles in hand allowing you to practice marketing new offerings and to conduct your own feasibility studies for practice and services expansion. Who knows- it may all go so well that your practice and services grow and you retain the temporary hire. If not, well there is nothing wrong with test driving that car before you own it! Think of the yearlong mat leave as an extended probation period with a built in re-negotiation or termination point leaving no hurt feelings in its wake! If at the end of the maternity leave the temporary employee is not a good fit, then furnish them with an honest reference (as you best see fit) and part ways on good terms.

As for training, remember the mantra that turned the self-help movement on its knees - "from me to we". Well, it applies here! Perhaps the biggest joy (though demanding and time consuming) in a veterinary career comes from mentorship. Mentoring new employees is a fulfilling part of this career and an approach that newer veterinary grads are actively seeking out in places of employ. Make yourself a mentoring guru and as a result watch

how your exam room client interactions and compliance improve as you better explain and engage people with more practice! Now go ahead and look at mat leaves as a way to bring new ideas and staff into your workplace basically on a yearlong "work a day". What a great way to test the waters!

Perhaps the best thing you can do is sit down with your staff member and review the risks and hazards of the veterinary workplace, but at the very least have them review and sign your practice pregnancy protocol. If you do not have a policy or protocol in place for accommodating pregnancy in your hospital, now is a great time to build one! Perhaps ask for the employee's help and then have them sign a memorandum of understanding stating that they have read the veterinary hospital occupational hazards protocol for the pregnant employee in your workplace, stating that they understand the risks of continued employment in a vet hospital during their pregnancy. Also ensure that your staff member tells their healthcare provider that they work in a vet clinic and have this acknowledged in your memorandum of understanding as well. Now sit back, relax and wait for the pitter patter of little feet! Who knows- this new addition may be a future colleague in the making! 🐾

#### **References**

**Rights and Responsibilities: A Guide to Employment Standards in Saskatchewan Part II of The Saskatchewan Employment Act 2014**