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PRECAUTIONS FOR PREGNANT VETERINARIANS IN PRACTICE



While the news of a pregnancy is (usually) met with excitement and anticipation, it can also be a source of anxiety for veterinary practice owners and associates early on. When to tell? Who to tell? What to do in the meantime?

If you are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant, educate yourself; you are protected from discrimination and harassment through the Saskatchewan Human Rights Code and Labour Standards Act.

Have a conversation with your employer and/or staff members as soon as you are comfortable discussing your pregnancy in order to inform them. This will (hopefully)

allow them to offer extra assistance and understanding, as well as to begin preparing for your impending maternity leave.

Depending on how your pregnancy proceeds, accommodations may need to be made in order to continue working up until your maternity leave begins, and may involve "changes or adjustments to working

conditions or hours of work" (1).

Accommodation in veterinary practice may include:

- Flexibility in scheduling to allow for doctor's appointments
- Reduced working hours, especially if the majority of the day is spent standing
- Longer appointment times
- Scheduled breaks
- Modified scope of practice with respect to species or procedures
- Extra assistance
- Special equipment
- Modified uniforms or dress requirements

Discuss your concerns with your health care provider and your employer so that mutually agreeable accommodations can be made with as much advanced notice as possible.

Pregnancy in the early stages can be a difficult secret to keep and it is not uncommon for co-workers to have suspicions before the news is made public. This is thanks, in part, to some of the potential occupational hazards we face in our profession.

Listed below are some risks associated with working in veterinary practice in general, but especially applicable to pregnant women. It is certainly not an exhaustive list and some of the risks may be unavoidable depending on your practice situation.

Anesthetic Gas

Anesthetic gas poses a risk to pregnant women because of the association with spontaneous abortion, miscarriage and congenital abnormalities (2). These risks can be minimized by ensuring anesthetic machines are maintained, scavenging systems are functioning correctly and

leak testing is performed on a regular basis. In addition, using injectable induction protocols, testing and inflating endotracheal tube cuffs prior to turning on the anesthetic, and oxygenating the patient post-procedure in order to flush the line can help reduce exposure to anesthetic gas.

Radiation

X-Rays, including dental x-rays and fluoroscopy, are common sources of radiation in a veterinary practice, and can cause fetal death and congenital abnormalities (2). Exposure can be avoided altogether by utilizing non-pregnant support staff and colleagues to take x-rays. If this is not possible, use personal protective equipment such as lead gowns and gloves and wear a dosimeter to measure exposure. Distance yourself from the x-ray beam by using sedation, cassette holders, and pedals or buttons which can be used remotely from behind a physical barrier such as a wall or door.

Medications and Chemicals

Medications, including hormones and chemotherapeutic agents, and chemicals such as formaldehyde can cause spontaneous abortion and congenital abnormalities (2). If possible, utilize non-pregnant staff members to fill prescriptions, administer medications and handle laboratory specimens, and avoid contact or inhalation. Otherwise, use protective equipment such as gloves and a mask and wash your hands after handling hazardous medications and chemicals.

Pathogens

Toxoplasmosis can cause spontaneous abortion, premature birth or neonatal infection (2). While cat feces is the most commonly thought of source of toxoplasmosis, exposure can also occur during meat inspection and necropsy of an infected animal (2). Risk of exposure can be minimized by using gloves and a mask, and hygiene practices such as

hand washing. There is a serological test available should a veterinarian want to assess her risk of infection while pregnant.

Physical Stress

Physical stress can include lifting, working long hours, and the risks associated with large or unruly animals. As these "risks" can be subjective and dependent on personal and pregnancy-related factors, a discussion with your health care provider is recommended.

According to the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, "If workers are concerned about how the hazards in their workplace could affect a pregnant woman or her child, they should talk first to their supervisor, manager or employer, then their Occupational Health Committee (OHC) or Occupational Health and Safety Representative. Concerned employers should consult with their OHC or representative. If there is neither an OHC nor a representative in their workplace, they should contact the Occupational Health and Safety Division at Saskatchewan Labour (2).

Websites and Resources

Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission
<http://saskatchewanhumanrights.ca/index>
<http://saskatchewanhumanrights.ca/+pub/documents/publications/PPW-v2.pdf>
Occupational Health and Safety Act

Occupational Health and Safety Division:
<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/business/safety-in-the-workplace>

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/~media/files/lrws/ohs/understanding%20occupational%20health%20and%20safety%20in%20saskatchewan.pdf>

References

1. <http://saskatchewanhumanrights.ca/+pub/documents/publications/PPW-v2.pdf>
2. http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3085&context=iowastate_veterinarian