

Risks of injury are higher when caring for large animals

Veterinarians have the right to advocate for their own safety on-farm.

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This article contains factual and anecdotal information concerning the risks of physical injury to veterinarians who work with large animals. It is well documented that small animal veterinarians are also at great risk of personal physical injury (bites, scratches, needle sticks, radiation and anaesthetic gas exposure, handling of reproductive and cytotoxic substances)¹, but for the purposes of this article, the focus will be on large animal veterinarians and their risk of work-related injuries. The need for veterinarians, as well as veterinary colleges and associations, to advocate for on-farm safety and proper animal restraint equipment will be emphasized

Veterinarians generally accept and understand that there exists an inherent risk of physical injury in practice while working with animals. The practice of veterinary medicine is considered a dangerous profession where the likelihood of injury is as high, or higher, than other high-risk jobs. For instance, a survey involving 620 equine veterinarians demonstrated that the rate of injury among them was greater than for other high-risk jobs (firefighters, construction workers, prison guards, etc.)²! Ninety-three percent of veterinarians surveyed had reported a job-related injury in the previous five years¹. Seventeen percent of these injuries had resulted in one or more days off work, with veterinarians working with large animals more likely to report injuries resulting in one or more days off work than small animal veterinarians¹.

It is possible that the rate of injury of vets may be even higher than reported as many veterinarians admit to self-treatment (suturing of lacerations, use of braces and analgesics, etc.) without reporting their injuries³.

There are a few different reasons why veterinarians might take on excessive risks of physical injury:

- Ego ("I'm the animal expert and if there's one person in this crowd who can or should do this procedure despite the unsafe environment, it's going to be me");
- Fear of appearing weak or scared before the client(s) or employer, or in comparison to one's colleagues;
- Client pressure/encouragement/guilt ("OK, so now you've assessed that the calf is too big to be pulled and

the cow is already lassoed to the fence; since you're already here, if you'd just do the C-section I wouldn't have to run home and get my trailer and haul her to the clinic; or, my trailer is broken down; or, I don't even have a trailer....");

- Employer pressure ("John is a long-time client [yes he is, even though he has never availed himself of safe handling facilities] so yes my dear associate, you should go ahead and do that C-section with the cow tied crudely to the fence.... oh don't worry, just have your guard up when you start incising so if she does kick you won't slash your wrist with the scalpel....").

How much risk individual veterinarians are willing to take in

the performance of their duties is a matter of personal choice when it comes right down to it. If you don't feel safe you have the right to say no to doing the work despite the client or employer pressure, guilt, or ego issues. Many other jobs have policies where the employee is expected NOT to do the work if conditions are unsafe. For instance, employees of the potash mines or Crown corporations would be reprimanded if they were found to be doing something that was unsafe or which did not adhere to their Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) guidelines.

In my own personal experience, when I was a younger veterinarian I accepted too much risk of personal injury. The reasons I did so were because I did not want to look scared or incapable, I felt my employer at the time expected me to do the work even if it was unsafe, and I feared being reprimanded in some way if I did not do it. Some of the risks I took did result in injuries, one of which caused me to be off work for two months. For those two months, my income was reduced to a living allowance provided me by Workers' Compensation (WC), I went through a long painful physical rehabilitation program, and I did not feel like a contributing member of society with meaningful work. (As an aside, all I can say is thank goodness

for WC, as they did provide me with some income, wasted no time in having me properly diagnosed, treated, and rehabilitated, and provided great follow-up care to get me back to work as quickly as possible.)

Consideration should be given to who is affected when a veterinarian is physically injured. Obviously, the injured veterinarian is directly affected by suffering pain, possibly needing to take time off work to heal or rehabilitate, and sadly, all too often the injury develops into a chronic problem that negatively affects the veterinarian's quality of life for years to come (e.g. arthritis, bursitis, back pain, depression, etc.)³. Large animal veterinarians indicate that chronic physical injuries are one of the most common reasons for leaving large animal practice, and many veterinarians have often been in active practice for less than fifteen years when injuries force them to choose another career path³.

The veterinarian's injury can affect many other people as well. The veterinarian's family may suffer from reduced income or may have to deal with the mental or social consequences that come with the veterinarian being off work, such as depression, anxiety, frustration, or mood swings.

Clinic staff may also be negatively affected. If the veterinarian is off work, there may be less of a need for support staff, even if momentarily, which could lead to reduced work hours for them. Animals can be negatively affected as well as there will be one less veterinarian in the workforce capable of providing their care.

The veterinary practice may suffer too. Clients may be turned away or will seek service elsewhere if there are not enough veterinarians on staff to provide animal care, and practice revenue would likely decrease as a result. If the practice suffers, so too does the community, its people, and their animals.

The point is, a lot of peo-

ple and animals may suffer all because of one poor choice made by a veterinarian to go ahead and do unsafe work that results in his or her injury. This is where positive self-worth, assertiveness, and confidence all come into play in helping the veterinarian advocate for his or her safety. Insisting that safe facilities be provided on client premises is part of practicing positive self-care; it does not mean that a veterinarian is weak or incapable.

Usually the client on whose premises the veterinarian was

occupational risk avoidance, and specific courses should be, and have been, developed to address this topic³.

Even with the best livestock handling systems available, we can never bring the chance of injury completely down to zero, but our goal should be to minimize injury as much as possible. Most livestock producers today have acquired reliable, safe handling equipment and we veterinarians should always make a point of thanking them for having done so. However, there are still a few producers who have

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injured suffers no consequences whatsoever. The worst thing that may happen to the client is that the work did not get completed because the veterinarian may have been too injured to finish the job.

Unlike other occupations, veterinarians do not have unions or OHS boards to advocate for their safety. The responsibility lies solely on the veterinarian to ask, or even insist, that safe handling and restraint facilities be provided on farms to minimize chances of injury.

Client education and a change in veterinarians' attitudes are important factors in lowering the risk of injury to veterinarians; we need to do away with the "macho" or "cowboy" approach to animal restraint³. The SVMA could assist its members in stressing the importance of safe facilities to large animal clients, and help them understand all the negative consequences that ensue when veterinarians are injured on their premises. It is incumbent upon veterinary colleges as well to provide more training and leadership in this area of

less than adequate facilities, and we need to educate these producers how safe livestock restraint facilities benefit not only the veterinarian, but the animals and producers as well.

These changes will not happen overnight, but by addressing this issue with the younger, upcoming generations of veterinarians, we will gradually see a shift in the attitudes and expectations of both large animal clients and veterinarians. ▮

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