

# Preparing the Small Animal Hospital for Avian and Exotic Animal Emergencies

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## KEYWORDS

- Emergency medicine • Equipment • Exotic pets • Husbandry • Psittacine birds
- Staff training • Technicians • Wildlife

## KEY POINTS

- There are many aspects of small animal emergency medicine that can be applied to the exotic animal patient.
- It is important for the entire hospital staff to work as a team for providing optimal care for avian and exotic patients.
- Because of the variety of species that may be seen, organization of supplies, designated areas, policies regarding wildlife, or more dangerous species, should be addressed before the intake of exotic emergencies.
- In a fast-paced emergency setting, a gentle, well-planned approach, combined with common sense and focused observational skills, is necessary for avian and exotic patients.
- Although there are a variety of diagnostic and treatment options available for exotic pets, it is important to approach these patients with intentional handling that avoids overstressing or injuring the patient.

## INTRODUCTION

Emergency and critical care for exotic animals is a complex topic because of the variety of species that may be seen. Any veterinary practice should expect to receive at least the occasional exotic emergency. Most hospitals that provide emergency and critical care for small animals comprise highly trained and educated technical staff that has access to critical care monitoring and diagnostics. Most of the technical skills familiar to clinicians and technicians can be transferred to exotic patients. Transferring those skills is often accomplished by not getting overwhelmed by the unknown and always pursuing knowledge and combining it with experience. It is beyond the scope of this article to cover all the intricacies of working with exotic animals. However, some of the logistics

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and strategic approaches for exotics in the small animal emergency hospital will help prepare the hospital staff to be effective and prepared for exotic animal emergencies.

### **MAKING THE DECISION TO SEE EXOTICS IN THE SMALL ANIMAL PRACTICE**

Exotic pets are frequently obtained without thought to the when and where of veterinary care needed for these unique animals. When an emergency arises, owners will often seek veterinary care with their local small animal hospital. Unfortunately, a visit to the veterinary hospital for an emergency may be the first and only time an exotic pet may ever receive veterinary care. Small animal hospitals may decide to take on these challenging emergencies for a variety of reasons:

- The community has a need for an emergency veterinary hospital that will also see exotic pets.
- The community frequently contacts the veterinary hospital for valuable information about the care and health of exotic pets.
- The hospital provides triage to sick or injured wildlife and provides the community with recommendations and support for native wildlife concerns and rehabilitation options within the bounds of state and federal laws and regulations.
- Veterinary clinicians and technicians enjoy working with a variety of species, and providing emergency veterinary care for these patients is a bonus to the joy and fulfillment of their career.
- Exotic pets will be brought to veterinary hospitals in an emergency whether advertised for or not.

If the hospital decides to accept exotic patients, it is usually because a clinician has a strong interest in practicing exotic animal medicine. For some staff, the variety of species and fear of the unknown may make them hesitant to join the team in this endeavor. Veterinary technicians with a strong interest in exotic animal medicine can play a leading role in helping set up the animal hospital to accept a variety of patients. In order for the hospital staff to work together, training plans should be set in place so that all of the staff, from the receptionists to assistants to technicians to clinicians, can be prepared. Veterinary technicians can provide client education, create entrance history forms, create training plans for coworkers, and set up hands-on training for clinicians and technicians. Compiling a collection of information resources for the hospital, such as bookmarked online educational and informational Web sites, journal articles, and textbooks, is recommended.<sup>1-12</sup>

### **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

Once a hospital has decided to accept exotic patients, policies should be designed that address several aspects of this endeavor. The practice will need to decide what species it will and will not accept. Some species are greater risk physically to humans, such as primates and venomous species. Large exotic cats may present safety concerns, and the hospital facility may not have the necessary equipment and space required for these species. If the hospital does decide to see some of these more inherently dangerous species, policies regarding handling and when they will be seen should be communicated with all hospital staff. For certain exotic species such as falconry birds, state and federal permits to possess these animals should be presented at the time of admission.

### **PROFESSIONAL STAFF INTEREST AND TRAINING**

Working with exotic patients may be a completely new experience or a limited past experience for many and may be something that encourages an individual to learn

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