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Emergency Service 24/7

BY ELANA BECK ARONS

While most people were enjoying July 4th BBQs and fireworks this summer, the emergency staff at the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital was busy caring for an overwhelming number of critically ill animals in need of urgent care. “We are typically inundated with trauma cases during the holidays,” states **Sally Powell**, nursing supervisor in Emergency Service. “Lacerations, heat stroke, car accidents and firework injuries are very common. July 4th is especially busy because animals are often brought in for high anxiety and stress resulting from the noise from the fireworks.”

This July 4th holiday was no different. Inside Penn Vet’s Emergency Service (ES) was an 11-year-old Shih Tzu who had had a two-week bout of pneumonia and was in respiratory distress; a kitten who was being evaluated for head trauma because its owner accidentally stepped on her; and a two-year-old mixed-breed dog who jumped off a 10-story bridge and was being x-rayed to evaluate the extent of his injuries. Just a few feet away, waiting patiently in the lobby was a Newfoundland whose owners brought him in for dietary indiscretion and vomiting, and a Chihuahua who was experiencing an allergic reaction and itching uncontrollably. Suddenly, the owner of a cat experiencing seizures arrived, the owners had mistakenly treated the cat with a dog-only flea and tick product.

The owners were as diverse as the patients. They came from West Philadelphia, the Main Line and the Jersey Shore, all seeking emergency care for their critically ill pets. “The weekends are the most demanding time for the Emergency Service seeing more than 30 patients

a day—about 60 percent dogs, 30 percent cats and 10 percent special species,” says Emergency Services director **Dr. Ken Drobatz, GM’02**.

Penn Vet’s Emergency Service is the largest and busiest academic emergency service in the world, treating more than 12,000 patients each year. To operate 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, takes a lot of personnel. “In total we have 7 board-certified criticalists, 16 full-time nurses, 10 part-time nurses, 9 critical care residents, 13 interns and 1 fellow,” explains Dr. Drobatz. “In any given day we could have upwards of 4 doctors on duty at one time.”



Elisa Rogers and Dr. Dan Hume.
Photo by John Donges



Above, Harper Heffron-Henese just adopted. Right, Dr. Laura Hoyt and Dr. Ezra Steinberg, V'06. Photo by John Donges



The mission of the ES is to provide compassionate patient care and excellence in teaching. “The Emergency Service teaches you to work fast and efficiently while maintaining focus,” states **Elizabeth Martin, CGS’06, V’11**, part-time ES nurse and third-year veterinary student. Virtually everyone in the ES is familiar with each patient. “Teaching is a very important component of the ES—the students are on the front line so they witness first hand everything going on,” says Sally Powell.

“Our students are exposed to a diverse caseload that they may not see at any other vet school simply because of our urban setting,” says Dr. Drobatz. “We have cared for and performed minor emergency surgeries on animals that have been stabbed, shot, hit by trains and/or cars, have fallen from a high-rise building, been struck by an arrow, and hit with an axe. We have also seen animals that have ingested illicit drugs such as cocaine and marijuana, and others who have eaten antifreeze and rat poisoning.”

Within minutes of each patient’s arrival, the animal is assessed by a nurse and/or student. “If upon assessment an animal is bleeding, comatose, has a weak pulse, pale gums, has a urinary blockage, a life-threatening arrhythmia or bloat symptoms, then the animal will be seen immediately by an emergency care specialist,” explains Elizabeth Martin. The animal will be treated, stabilized and if necessary remain in the emergency room overnight until it is transferred to a specialty service within the hospital or to the local veterinary practice the next day. If the animal is in need of ventilation, it will go directly to the ICU for one-on-one nursing care. If the animal is not critically ill, a student will perform an initial exam and discuss

treatment options with the clinician preceptors before presenting options to the pet’s family.

About 25 percent of Penn’s emergency cases are transferred to other areas of the hospital. For example, Harper, an eight-week-old yellow Labrador puppy described by her owner as playful, lovable and laid back, suddenly became very lethargic and unwilling to walk. When Harper’s condition worsened her veterinarian referred her owner Beth Henese to Penn Vet. Harper was in extreme pain when she arrived at the ES. After examination she underwent a series of limb radiographs, blood tests and a lameness evaluation. She was kept overnight on intravenous fluids and pain medication. When her condition was stable, she was admitted to the hospital’s Internal Medicine Service, under the care of **Dr. Rachel Cooper**. She was ultimately diagnosed and treated for hypertrophic osteodystrophy, a rare bone disease that usually affects rapidly growing dogs and causes severe lameness and pain in multiple limbs. In a few days Harper began to play, wag her tail and crawl to her water bowl. She was homeward bound.

Beth Henese was pleased with how Harper’s conditions were diagnosed and how she was treated. “All the clinicians are wonderful. Dr. Cooper in particular responded immediately to calls and was very thorough. She had a real connection with Harper and we are grateful we found her and Penn Vet.”

So, the next time you are enjoying a barbecue or holiday celebration, remember that Penn Vet’s ES staff is working 24/7 (and 365 days) to make sure that expert care is available when animals are in distress. 🐾