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Before taking up her current role, Suzanne worked in small animal clinics across the country. During her time in clinical practice she also worked as a student veterinary nurse assessor and clinical coach.

Caring for rabbits in practice

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ABSTRACT: With rabbits now being the third most popular pet in the UK, they are becoming more frequent visitors to veterinary practices; the PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report 2013 showed that 68 per cent of rabbits are now registered with a veterinary practice.

By providing pet owners with reliable, easy-to-understand information and a welcoming environment in the practice, veterinary nurses can encourage a greater number of visits for routine health checks and preventive measures. This is why Rabbit Awareness Week is set to return on 10 May 2014 to highlight the health status of Britain's pet rabbits and ask owners to make 'One Small Hop' to help improve the health and welfare of their pet.

The Rabbit Awareness Week (RAW) initiative offers free health checks nationwide at participating vet practices. Signing up your practice to Rabbit Awareness Week can have a very positive effect – from an increase in business to access to free RAW support materials, including posters and care guides. Registering your practice couldn't be easier, so visit www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk and join the rabbit revolution.

It is important to view the clinic through the eyes of the rabbits, as a visit to the vets can be very stressful and we should try to minimise the impact of this as much as possible.

Think rabbit

Pet owners should be encouraged to keep their rabbits in bonded pairs or compatible groups, and when visiting the clinic both/all of the rabbits should attend.

Separating a rabbit from a pair or a group may irreparably damage the bond and lead to aggression and behavioural issues on reintroduction. Generally most pet owners are happy to cooperate when they understand that it is in the best interest of their pets.

The planning and preparation should begin from when the pet owner telephones the clinic to make an appointment – which should be arranged for quieter time of the day where possible

to ensure that rabbits are not sitting next to dogs, cats, ferrets or other predators in the waiting room. Having a separate waiting area is ideal if feasible.

If making an appointment for an admission, there are additional points to consider – the owner should be asked to bring with them to the clinic an item with which their pet is familiar; they should also bring some of the rabbit's usual food; and they should be asked if their rabbit uses a litter tray and, if so, which substrate. (If this latter cannot be provided by the clinic, the pet owner should bring some with them).

When a pet owner understands why they are being asked all these questions they are generally appreciative of the extra effort being made to ensure their pet has a safe visit to the clinic.

The waiting area can be used as a source of information for pet owners to help educate them. Ideally materials should cover the five welfare needs: diet, environment, behaviour, companionship and health.

Prior to the appointment, the consultation room should be thoroughly cleaned and, where possible, a clean tunic worn as even the scent of a predator can cause the rabbit distress. Placing a large clean towel on the consult table allows a safe surface on which the rabbits can grip (**Figure 1**). They can also be wrapped in the towel to aid in safe examination.

To cite this article use either
DOI: 10.1111/vnj.12128 or *Veterinary Nursing Journal* VOL 29 pp123–125



Figure 1. Placing a large clean towel on the consult table allows a safe surface on which the rabbits can grip

For very fractious rabbits, it is preferable to open the carrier on the floor and allow them time to become acclimatised to their new surroundings; this will help reduce the risk of injury from jumping from the table. Rabbits should never be grasped or picked up by their ears (**Figure 2a & 2b**).

If hospitalised, rabbits should be housed with their companion together with a familiar item from home. They should be placed away from any 'predators' and ideally in the bottom level cages to minimise the risk of injury when they are being brought in and out of the kennel.

Figures 2a & 2b. Rabbits should always be handled carefully and never be grasped or picked up by their ears



They should have a litter tray or area with a substrate with which they are familiar. At the time of admission, it is important to find out whether the rabbit usually drinks from a bowl or a bottle, so that this can be provided in a familiar way. Also consider providing fresh foodstuff material and, of course, ample amounts of fresh, good quality hay.

Rabbits are particularly prone to heat stress and ambient temperatures should be controlled. There should be a bare patch left on the floor of the kennel, so that the rabbits have the opportunity to control their own body temperature and owners should be encouraged to bring their rabbits to the clinic in a robust, well-ventilated carrier.

A thorough history is vital and it is important to chat with the pet owner about more than just the presenting condition. So during the consultation process, it is a good idea to follow the headings of the Five Welfare Needs to ensure that all aspects of the rabbits' health and welfare are covered:

Diet

It is vital to educate pet owners on feeding their rabbits a suitable and healthy diet, including the difference between bedding and food hay, how to assess good quality hay, the provision of appropriate fresh material and the benefits of feeding a mono-component concentrate feed.

Environment

Do the rabbits live indoors or outdoors; do they have constant access to exercise, if not at what times and how frequently; what size is their accommodation and exercise areas; do they live in a rural or urban area; are there any other in-contact pets; or wildlife present in the vicinity?

Behaviour

The consultation is an ideal time to educate the pet owner on normal and positive behaviours, and also signs of issues.

Companionship

Discuss the benefits of appropriate companionship, and how to manage any developing issues. Sometimes it may be necessary to refer the pet owner and their rabbits to an animal behaviourist.

Health

The general principles of a rabbit health check are similar to those of any other mammalian species. The key is to be thorough and consistent, using the same

order and technique each time. Vaccination and neuter status should also be discussed, with both being actively encouraged.

Basic health check notes

Initially observe the rabbit in the consultation room once it has settled, monitoring general demeanour, how it moves and its respiratory rate.

Look in the carrier for any faecal material – examine its size, shape and colour; information can be gained on the functioning of the gut from the appearance of faecal material. Pellets should be large, fibrous, pale and round. Pellets that are small, tear-shaped or very dark may indicate lower gut motility problems.

Ears

Some wax is normal; the horizontal and vertical canals should be examined with an otoscope and a normal tympanic membrane is translucent and white. It is not recommended to clean a rabbit's ears. The ear canals should be free from inflammation, discharges, masses and ectoparasites.

Nose

The nose should be free from discharges and signs of sneezing or dyspnoea.

Eyes

The eyes should be bright, open and free from swellings and discharges. The opening to the tear duct should also be examined.

Mouth and jaw

Feel along the jaw line – it should be free from lumps and irregularities. The sensitive vibrissae around the lips can make the mouth difficult to examine.

A conscious oral examination is limited owing to the small oral opening and this should be explained to owners (**Figures 3 & 4**).

There is benefit to carrying out dental radiography so, safety considerations permitting, conscious horizontal beam lateral skull radiographs can be taken with the rabbit wrapped in a towel (**Figure 5**).

Skin and coat

The coat should be clean, free from matting, soft and dense. Part the fur to check the skin noting any lesions, crusting, scaling or wetness.



Figure 3. A dental examination



Figure 4. An examination of the incisors



Figure 5. Conscious horizontal beam lateral skull radiographs can be taken with the rabbit wrapped in a towel

Cardiovascular system

Assess mucous membrane colour and capillary refill time; auscultate four quadrants of the chest recording any murmurs or abnormal lung sounds; when the rabbit is calm and exploring the room, observe its respiratory rate.

Abdomen

Palpate the abdomen carefully and gently with flat hands – auscultation and percussion of the abdomen can yield useful additional information (Figure 6). The abdomen should feel soft and be free from discomfort.

Genitalia and perineum

The genitals should be examined, and be free from abnormal discharges and swellings. The fur around the perineum should be clean and clear from signs of uneaten caecotrophs, or urine scalding.

Feet

The feet should be examined thoroughly, parting the fur to examine for signs of pododermatitis. Nails should be checked and clipped if overgrown.

Weight and body condition score

It is important to have an accurate body weight for every patient we see in practice – none more so than rabbits, especially when planning a general anaesthetic. However, it is also very important to 'body condition score' the pet. This is a simple technique that can involve the pet owner, helping them to take control of their pet's weight.

The Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (PFMA) has produced helpful resources for rabbits, dogs, cats and birds for pet owners to use to 'body condition score' their pets. These can be found at [http://www.pfma.org.uk/_assets/weigh-in-](http://www.pfma.org.uk/_assets/weigh-in-wednesday/pet-size-o-meter-rabbit.pdf)



Figure 6. Palpate the abdomen carefully and gently

www.pfma.org.uk/_assets/weigh-in-wednesday/pet-size-o-meter-rabbit.pdf and printed for pet owners to take home. It is important for pet owners to be aware of the negative impact excess weight has on the health and welfare of their pets. [vni](#)

10 – 18 May
RABBIT AWARENESS WEEK
'ONE SMALL HOP'

Following the 'RAWing' success of last year, Rabbit Awareness Week is set to return in 2014 to kick-start a campaign that aims to prompt 'One Small Hop' of change from owners from this May.

RAW, an annual campaign that aims to highlight the health and welfare of Britain's bunnies, is backed by Burgess Excel, the RSPCA, PDSA, Blue Cross, MSD Animal Health, Bayer Animal Health, Practice Plan for Vets, RWAFA (Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund) and Wood Green, The Animals Charity

These major UK animal welfare charities and pet experts applauded the British pet industry professionals for their support in 2013, marking it as the most successful campaign in its eight-year history. They will unite again this year, to champion correct healthcare and welfare of Britain's third most popular pet.

In 2014, RAW is looking to simplify the steps that owners can take to improve their rabbits' welfare. Many can be overwhelmed by the thought of changing how they approach each of their pets' five welfare needs at the same time. This year's campaign will ask owners to change one thing – one

welfare need of their choosing – as a starting point to improving all five of their rabbits' health and welfare needs in the future.

By changing just one element of welfare, the RAW initiative aims to show just how much this impacts the health of their rabbits and, therefore, inspire owners to meet all five welfare needs to ensure the well-being of their furry family members.

Once again, the organisers are urging vets, retailers and rescue centres more than ever before to offer a helping hand to consumers to highlight the importance of preventive healthcare and welfare advice for rabbits, by signing up to the 2014 initiative at www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk.

It couldn't be easier to sign up and be part of RAW 2014. If you are hosting a rabbit healthcare clinic or an event, visit www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk to order your free support kit and register your event.

