Handling Aggressive Animals

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The number of people hospitalised for dog attacks has increased by almost 50% in the past decade, according to a new report, commissioned by pet insurer LV=. The report also found that nine out of ten (88%) of these attacks required emergency treatment.

When surveying Veterinary surgeons the most common breed of dog in the United Kingdom that is inclined to be aggressive is the German Shepherd. This is followed by the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Rottweiler and Jack Russell. Veterinary staff are under constant threat from aggressive animals It is for this reason that the Veterinary Nurse must be aware of the signs of aggression and the techniques that can be employed to ensure health and safety within the work place.

Why might an animal be aggressive?

There are several reasons why an animal may display aggressive behaviour. These may include:

- Phobias developed through no socialisation or previous experiences
- Defence
- Nerves
- Pain
- Age
- Stress

Recognising the signs

Safe and effective animal handling demands concentration and the knowledge to read the body language that the animal maybe displaying. Taking a few moments to visually assess the dog or cat that you are about to handle can make your job both safer and easier. Questions to ask yourself should include:
1. What is the animal’s stature? Is it showing submissive behaviour such as low to the ground, showing its abdomen or confidently forward.
2. Are the animal’s ears forward or flat against its head?
3. Is the animal vocalising e.g. growling or whining
4. What are the hackles doing? Are they raised?
5. What is the position of the animal’s tail, e.g. between its legs or held up?
6. What are the animals eyes doing? Are the fixed and staring
7. Are they urinating or defecating

Controlling the behaviour

It is worth remembering that an animal may not be aggressive towards its owner, especially within its own environment. When an animal is put into an unfamiliar environment or with the presence of pain or nerves their behaviour can quickly change. Many owners are often shocked and distressed to discover that this is the case and may find it difficult to accept making owner compliance difficult.

There are many techniques that can be used to try to improve the aggressive behaviour, but before a technique is employed a possible cause of the aggression should be identified. Is the animal passive aggressive normally seen when the animal is confined to a kennel or is it reacting this way out of fear? Has the animal been socialised correctly or is it not used to seeing other animals, humans or visiting the vets. Has it previously had a bad experience? By communicating with the owner vital details on the animal’s history can be gained enabling a better understanding on how to deal with the animal.

Techniques to improve the behaviour may include:

1) Taking the animal away from its owner

Many animals have a protective instinct towards their owner. If the animal is examined away from them their aggressive behaviour generally disappears.

2) The use of synthetic medication. Examples include Zylkine, D.A.P or Feliway

It is worth remembering that this medication has to be started by an owner many weeks in advance for a desired effect to be achieved. It can however be useful to have a Diffusser placed into areas within the practice that an animal may experience stress such as, kennel, reception and consultation areas.

3) Medication in the form of sedations/premedication

If the animal had presented to the practice for a surgical procedure or examination it is worth administrating the sedation or premedication in the
presence of the owner. The animal can then be left with the owner until the desired effect has been achieved in a less stressful environment.

4) Environment

Once the animal has been admitted it is advisable to place them into calm and quiet surroundings. This should be an area that is away from noisy patients. Covering the kennel with a blanket to provide privacy may also prove useful in calming the animal down.

5) Prevention

By encouraging owners to attend puppy parties will not only educate them on the importance of socialisation, but will enable puppies to encounter other people, animals and surroundings which can reduce the risk of nervous aggression developing later on in life.

6) Confidence building and positive rewards

Encourage owners to “pop in” regularly with their pets for non invasive procedures. Ideal examples can include coming in regularly just to use the practice weighing scales to weigh their pet or, to meet members of the practice team and offer rewards in the form of praise or treats.

7) Behaviour consultations

It may be advisable to recommend a behavioural consultation with a behavioural expert who will be able to give owners areas to work on with their pet to improve aggressive behaviour.

8) Neutering?

This is something that needs to be discussed in detail with the owners as it is not often the answer to the animal’s behavioural issues. It may prove beneficial if the aggression is generated towards other animals.

Handling techniques

Handling the patient correctly will ensure the safety of the person holding them and the person completing the examination.

Rules to follow should include:

1) Avoid eye contact at all times as looking them directly in the eye will present a challenge to the animal making the aggression worse.
2) Before handling the animal take a moment to allow the animal to become comfortable with you and its surroundings.
3) Talk to the animal in a low, calm and quiet voice.
4) Ask the owner to place a muzzle onto the animal before you attempt to handle it or to place it into a crush cage in the case of cats.
5) Ensure that all dogs’ collars are fitted and secured correctly.
6) Use a long slip lead which can easily be placed over the dog and secured to the outside of the kennel. This will enable you to gain easy access to them.
7) Try to get the animal to come to you by patting your leg and calling to them.
8) Place the animal into a low kennel in a quiet and calm area.
9) Identify to others that the animal is or maybe aggressive by posting a CARE sign on the kennel and recording it on the animal’s record chart.
10) Attach a towel to the outside of the kennel to provide the animal with privacy enabling it to feel more secure in its surroundings.
11) Ensure that all equipment needed for the animal is set up before attempting to handle them and is in a good working order.
12) Avoid having lots of people around when handling the animal.
13) Concentrate on the animal that you are handling without being distracted by others.
14) Avoid sitting on the floor whilst handling the animal, if they become aggressive you will be unable to move away and risk serious bites.
15) Be prepared to protect yourself or move away quickly.
16) Finally know when to ask for help!!!!

Types of restraint

In most cases the least restraint used is often the best restraint especially in the cases of cats. Every animal and situation is different and should be assessed prior to handling.

There are two types of restraint that can be used; these are Verbal restraint and physical restraint.

Verbal restraint is using commands that are easily recognisable to the animal. Examples include SIT, STAY, COME, DOWN and NO and can be used to encourage an animal to cooperate.

Physical restraint is using equipment and tools to physically restrain the animal.

Tools and equipment

1) Leads
   The correct lead placed around a dog’s neck is an excellent form of control even enabling control of large dogs. It is an essential piece of equipment ensuring the safety of the handler, other staff, and patients within the Veterinary surgery.
   All dogs being transported within the surgery should always have a lead attached. The leads should be checked for damage before and after use.
2) Your hands
Your hands can be used to exert pressure onto the animal, provide comfort and reassurance and grasp a struggling or aggressive cat. The handler should be confident when using this technique to avoid injury.

The animal should be placed onto a surface at a suitable level in sternal recumbancy; the Nurse should place one hand under the animal’s neck pulling the head towards them and away from the person performing the examination. The other arm should be placed over the patient pulling them close to their body in a firm manner.

It may be necessary to place the animal into lateral recumbancy using one arm over the patient’s neck securing the front legs whilst the other arm is placed over the body of the dog securing its back legs. By holding the animal’s legs in this way it will stop the animal being able to pull itself up.

3) Towels
Towels can be an ideal way to restrain cats and small dogs. They can be particularly useful in brachycephalic breeds of dogs where muzzles cannot be used. The towel can either be gently rolled up and placed around the animal’s neck or wrapped around the cat leaving the head exposed and providing protection from sharp claws.

4) Dog catchers
These are useful when handling extremely aggressive dogs or wild animals and when trying to retract them from the back of kennels. They consist of a pole with a wire loop attached to the end that can be placed around the animal’s neck and secured in place. This loop is then released when the procedure has been completed. It can however if used incorrectly cause injury to the animal and therefore should only be used by experienced members of staff that know how to release the dog catcher quickly.

5) Muzzles
Muzzles are often the first item of choice when dealing with aggressive dogs but they can also be used in fractious cats. There are several different types of muzzle available, to include, Nylon muzzles, plastic basket muzzles and tape muzzles made from gauge bandage.

It is important to select the correct size muzzle which is secured tightly to ensure the animal does not remove it. The muzzle should be placed onto the dog from behind and fastened behind the animals head. Tape muzzles can be placed onto the animal if a normal muzzle cannot be placed. NB a muzzle should never be left on an unattended animal.

6) Crush cages
A crush cage is a cage that has a retractable panel. The animal, generally an aggressive cat or wild animal is placed into the cage; the panel is then slid
across pressing the animal against the side. It is an effective tool enabling injectable medication usually sedation to be given safely without harm to the handler or animal.

7) Drugs
Drugs are often used in animals that are too aggressive to handle safely when treatment is needed. This is often in the form of sedation and or general anaesthesia. Once the drug has been delivered it is important that the animal is placed into a quiet dark area to allow the medication to take effect.

Correct restraint is most critical when performing examinations, administering anaesthetic or medication. This needs to be performed in such a way as to minimise stress to the animal and handlers. Too much restraint can cause injury to the animal or worsen the situation, whereas too little can result in the animal escaping or injuring the handler. By identifying the reasons behind the behaviour and dealing with the situation in a confident and calm manner injuries will be avoided and treatment received efficiently with the best outcome.