

Georgina Self

# Keeping tortoises in wine coolers

*The most appropriate hibernation housing for exotic pets is a wine cooler, while parrots have the mental capacity of a young child, Anna Meredith, a RCVS recognised specialist in zoo animal and wildlife medicine told the nursing stream at the recent FECAVA congress*

With delegates and speakers from across Europe together, it was fitting that the morning nursing sessions were about the more exotic and unusual species we treat. The sessions were shared by two leaders in the field, Professor Anna Meredith and Bairbre O'Malley, who couldn't fail to inspire us with their obvious passion and enthusiasm for the topics they discussed.

Professor Meredith opened the day with an interesting talk on the care of birds and reptiles and said most problems in these species can be linked to poor husbandry. Their housing, dietary and behavioural requirements can be extremely specific yet owners tend not to seek advice prior to purchase. Anna suggested various methods of educating owners including open evenings, information leaflets and having appropriate merchandise for sale in the practice waiting room. She also suggested we educate ourselves regarding the different species of bird that may be presented for treatment. Behavioural training is recommended over wing clipping, allowing birds more freedom and social interaction, with the cage reserved for roosting and safety reasons only. Parrots in particular are more intelligent than dogs, having the mental capacity of a three-four year old child, so stimulating toys are required as well as suitable items to destroy eg. phonebooks. Moving onto reptiles and chelonians, Anna illustrated the different species we might see, how to identify and sex them. Diet and housing are different and specific for each species. Tortoises are probably the most commonly seen 'exotic' pet and Anna discussed the usefulness of pre hibernation checks to assess suitability for and length of hibernation periods. We've also moved on from the 'Blue Peter' style box of straw, with wine chillers recommended as the best housing for the hibernation period.

Bairbre O'Malley, lecturer in exotic species at UCD and the principal of the first hospital specialising in exotic pets in Ireland, continued the subject of reptiles, discussing their care when hospitalised. She discussed safe handling and methods for hydration and feeding plus commonly used drug preparations and diagnostics.

## RABBITS

The less exotic but still often, unfamiliar, rabbits were the



Delegates at one of the nursing lectures at FECAVA.

subject of the late morning sessions. Anna discussed making the practice more rabbit friendly and Bairbre talked about the nursing care of anorexic rabbits. As this species is the third most popular mammalian pet with our neighbours the UK, the appearance of rabbits in consultation rooms here is likely to increase.

Rabbits suffer greatly from stress, the physiological effects of which can lead to serious conditions including gastrointestinal stasis and hyperglycaemia. Anna suggested ways to make the practice visit less stressful. Receptionists and nurses should be familiar with basic advice for rabbit owners. We should also be aware of what constitutes an urgent problem or an emergency. Any rabbit which hasn't eaten for more than 12 hours should be seen urgently and diarrhoea is considered an emergency. There should be a separate, quiet area for rabbits to wait or be hospitalised in. Bringing the rabbit's 'bonded' hutch mate along with them to any appointment should be recommended, as is supplying the animals usual food and familiar feeding equipment. On the subject of nursing anorexic rabbits, Bairbre O'Malley told us that sick rabbits are often stoic and while their



The nursing session included lectures on the care of exotic pets.


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symptoms may be subtle, they may be sicker than we initially think. Record keeping is just as vital and useful for rabbits as for cats and dogs. Recording the weight is particularly useful. Whilst dental problems are the most familiar to us, anorexia has many causes in rabbits and a full examination is required for diagnosis. Is the patient in shock? Or dehydrated? In pain? Rabbits are obligate nose breathers so any mouth breathing is a sign of respiratory distress. Neurological signs such as head tilt or paralysis are also frequently seen. Whatever the underlying cause, it is important to keep the gut working so we should supply fluids and feed as appropriate by syringing or nasogastric tube.

### CARE FOR RECOVERY

After lunch, a chance to visit the exhibition area and to enjoy the views of the boats on the River Liffey, the nurses programme recommenced with a new theme of post operative care and pain management. Our first speaker was Dr Eithne Comerford, Senior Lecturer in Small Animal Orthopaedics, Liverpool, who talked about the ideal conditions and standards of care for recovery, an area which can be overlooked in busy practices. Covering room layout; monitoring charts; wound care and catheter care, Eithne provided useful revision and gave us some new ideas, for example, the use of a coma scale to assess mentation. Paul Crawford Cert VA MRCVS gave an interesting talk on how we assess pain and the differences between acute and chronic pain and their treatment. Paul recommended the use of species specific pain scores to make assessment objective. He then discussed the action and uses of different analgesic drugs, non drug therapy and non conventional methods. The final speaker was Maria Gomez- Sanchez. Maria is a nurse at UCD vet hospital and co runs the Animal Rehabilitation Centre which is based there. As well as being a RVN, Maria is a qualified human Physical Therapist and is currently studying for a certificate in Equine Rehabilitation Therapy. Her first talk was on Hydrotherapy and its application in animal rehabilitation. Maria explained the properties of water and how they are used. How a specific treatment plan is formulated was discussed and we were then able to see videos of patients receiving hydrotherapy. In Maria's second lecture, she discussed physiotherapy and how it can be used to improve the range of joint movement, retain function and speed recovery. After explaining the tricky subject of tissue healing phases to us, Maria again used videos of actual cases to illustrate how and why certain techniques are used and when they are appropriate.