



Dr Anne Fawcett talks about animal emergencies podcast

Cathy: Hello, this is Cathy Beer from Pets4Life, and today's podcast is about animal emergencies and first aid for pets. On the line with me now is Dr Anne Fawcett, a Sydney-based small animal veterinarian and journalist who also lectures in veterinary science at the University of Sydney, Anne has published numerous articles on veterinary medicine. And she has her own blog, smallanimaltalk.com. Welcome, Anne, to the podcast!

Dr Fawcett: Thanks very much, Cathy.

Cathy: If you could just shed some light, what are some of the typical cat and dog emergencies you see at your clinic?

Dr Fawcett: Gosh, we see lots and lots of things. Insect bites and stings would be one thing that we see reasonably commonly. Something that we call "blocked cats," which is basically usually a male cat who can't urinate, probably because there's a mucus plug in the tip of the penis.

Cathy: Oh.

Dr Fawcett: And it actually works to plug the urinary tract. It's extremely painful, and that's a really common thing. Yeah, very painful.

Cathy: Ugh, that sounds awful.

Dr Fawcett: Yes. Poor things, they're always trying to go to the litter tray and scratching and scratching, and nothing's coming out. And they'll go back, and the owners will often say they're very distressed when they're trying to go the toilet.

The other things that we see commonly are, particularly with dogs, ingestion of toxins. So, either they eat medications or toxic plants in the yard—like Brunfelsia, or yesterday-today-and-tomorrow, is one that's bad—snail bait, rat bait...those kinds of things. The other thing that we see dogs more than cats do quite a lot is eat indigestible items. So, from that I mean things like socks and undies—they'll actually eat those and swallow them, and they get stuck in the intestines. Plastic toys, bits of rubber... You name it, if it's on the floor and it's not nailed down, dogs seem to ingest it—particularly puppies. Other emergencies we see are ticks, snake bites, cuts and lacerations, trauma—so, motor vehicle accidents or

animals that are hit by a car. Animals that do silly things like underestimate the distance they can jump and get impaled on fences and terrible things like that. We occasionally see near drownings—obviously, we don't see drownings because those poor animals have passed away—but the near drownings would occur, for example, when an animal falls in the swimming pool and can't get out.

Cathy: Oh, dear.

Dr Fawcett: Heat stress—we saw quite a bit of that over summer. Seizures. Another common thing that we see is a lot of vomiting. So one vomit, we don't usually consider an emergency, but we get situations where an animal might have vomited 10, 20 times even—quite a lot of times. Another thing that we see is dystocia, or trouble whelping or trouble weaning or giving birth. Some animals are pregnant and they're going to have a litter of puppies, but they just seem to get fatigued just when they're about to be born, and that's an emergency. Another thing that we commonly see, particularly over summer, are things like hot spots, which are these really acute, nasty skin rashes that can appear in a matter of hours. Dogs can sort of rip off all the surface of their skin in an area because it's so itchy there, and that's called a hot spot, and they're extremely painful.

Cathy: Oh, boy. So there are quite a lot of things there, Anne... <Laughs>

Dr Fawcett: <Laughs> Yes.

Cathy: ...Probably a lot of those that you haven't mentioned as well.

Dr Fawcett: Yes.

Cathy: What can we (as pet parents) do, if anything, to prevent some of these emergencies?

Dr Fawcett: Loads of things. And there are sort of specific things for each emergency. For example, I talked about vomiting, and one of the common causes of vomiting is Parvovirus. But it's almost 100% preventable with vaccinations. So making sure your animals are vaccinated is definitely one way to prevent those kinds of emergencies. With motor vehicle traumas, we're actually seeing less and less of those, which is definitely good news, and the reason we're seeing less is that most people walk their dogs on a lead and most people in the city are driving slowly. So as pet parents, we can make sure our dogs are on lead and make sure our cats are confined, particularly at night, because it seems to be cats really get into strife in the night hours, when they get a little bit bolder and a little bit crazy and they want to go out and be on their territory. <Laughs>

Cathy: Yeah.

Dr Fawcett: And that also helps prevent catfights as well, because the majority of those happen at night. So, keeping our animals safe in their environments. Things like toddler-proofing the house—if you've got a puppy or kitten, you really need to toddler-proof the house, because they don't really know what the rules are. They don't know what they should and shouldn't do. So they'll try and chew on everything, they'll taste everything, and that's a real issue. For example, one of the things we see is kittens that eat string and wool and stuff like that, and they don't know not to swallow it, so they will do that. The other thing you can do is just make sure to check your backyard for toxic plants. If you do have yesterday-today-and-tomorrow, or cycads, or things like that, just look out for those. And the other thing about plants is often they drop big seeds, and some dogs that aren't particularly discerning will eat those seeds, and they can cause an obstruction of the intestines.

Dr Fawcett: If you check for those kinds of things and do a bit of a seed sweep, or remove some plants from the garden, that might be a good thing. Also, for ticks—well, definitely there's some great tick prevention out there, so getting some tick prevention on board. Preventing, more than actually treating, is the safer thing. In terms of animals having trouble giving birth, well, the obvious solution at the moment is de-sexing them. The other emergencies that de-sexing prevents—in male dogs there's a condition called perineal hernia, where basically the muscles around the bum end get very, very loose, and sometimes the bladder can actually herniate through that, and that's an emergency because they can't pee. And for female dogs, if they're not de-sexed, one of the conditions they can get is Pyometra, an infected uterus, and that, again, is an emergency. So if you're not breeding from them, de-sexing them is a very good idea. It also prevents mammary cancer as well. The other thing that we can do is socialise your dog well so they're less likely to get into fights. So all that time in puppy preschool...going to a good trainer really makes a difference.

Cathy: Yes, yes, those are all fantastic points, Anne. Thank you very much. I believe you wrote the content for an app called First Aid for Pets. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Dr Fawcett: Yes, I worked with another veterinarian. Our first job was to try and create a list of all the things that can go wrong that might require first aid, which was actually quite a lot. <Laughs> There are lots of things that animals can get into, and that's probably because they live in our world—it's all designed for us; it's not really designed for animals—and so it's very easy for us to forget things. For example, women commonly carry medication in their handbags, or men do too in their man-bags, and they're often left on the floor when someone comes in, so it's easy for the dog or cat to get into the medication. So we've had cats eating anti-depressants and stuff like that.

Cathy: Oh.

Dr Fawcett: <Laughs> Yeah, I know. It doesn't really help with depression in the cats; it just makes them very, very sick.

Cathy: No. Okay.

Dr Fawcett: What we wanted to do was create a list of all the things that could happen, and it's anything from chocolate toxicity when they eat chocolate, to major wounds and things like that. And providing steps that owners can do in those few minutes when they notice a problem—between when they notice and when they get the animal to the vet—that they can do to help save a life.

So for example, if you've got a bleeding animal with a clearly open wound, putting pressure on that wound can stave off the bleeding, and that can be life-saving. If you've got an animal that's choking, some people don't realise you can actually pull the tongue right out and sweep the hand down the back of the throat. Obviously, you need to be very careful not to get bitten, but that can relieve the choking hazard, and then you can get the animal to a vet and make sure that they're okay. So doing all of those things, having a little app that's very quick for people to download—that they can look up in a hurry, and it also directs them to the nearest emergency clinic—was really, really important. So, that was one of the things.

The other strength of that particular app is that a lot of owners don't realize what's toxic to animals. There are things that we can eat quite easily that are poisonous to animals. Obvious examples would be onions—humans seem to be able to eat endless onions, and we survive. We can also seem to eat a lot of chocolate, but that can cause death and very serious other signs in animals, so understanding what is toxic is part of the emphasis of that app. So, providing owners with a bit of a list, because then, if they notice that their animal's eaten something and they look it up and say, that's toxic, they can get veterinary attention before that toxin is absorbed. That can prevent really serious things like organ failure, so it's worth intervening. Basically, if you see your animal eating something that it shouldn't, getting to the vet sooner rather than later can be lifesaving.

Cathy: That sounds like a very clever and very helpful little app there. So that's called First Aid for Pets. Does it cost anything, this app?

Dr Fawcett: It's free and it's available on iTunes and, I believe, Google Play. We've had, I believe, 50,000 downloads...

Cathy: Wow.

Dr Fawcett: ...So it's quite a popular little information source. Yeah!

Cathy: Well, that sounds like a really important thing that every pet parent should have, so thanks very much for talking about that.

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