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Ask the Experts: What should you do if a staff member gets bitten during treatment?

Getting nipped at by anxious canine patients is a potential hazard of the job for veterinary team members, and knowing what to do in the wake of a dog bite is crucial. We created this article to educate the practice team on what to do if a bite happens during handling or treatment—because quick action is important when it comes to bites.

Many dog bites occur because the patient is anxious, fearful, sick, or in pain. While adhering to best handling practices for canine patients can reduce the likelihood of bites during handling or treatment, dog bites can still occur even if all the necessary measures are taken. Knowing what steps to follow in the aftermath of a bite ensures practice staff can take quick, confident action and get the situation under control in a way that prioritizes both the injured person and the patient.

What should I do if a staff member is bitten during treatment?

1. Stay calm. While it is easier said than done (especially if you're the one on the receiving end of the bite), stay calm and get to safety as soon as possible. Shouting, frantic movements, and other reactive behaviors might make the dog more reactive.

2. Control the patient. Have non-injured team members gain control of the patient. Clients should not restrain their own animal, particularly if the animal is acting in a fearful or aggressive way. It's not possible to predict how a dog will react in an agitated state, and a client who attempts to console their animal might end up being bitten as well. If the client already has the dog under control, however, they should be instructed what to do based on the situation.

3. Attend to the bitten staff member. The injured employee should receive first aid at once. Wash superficial wounds thoroughly. If the injuries are serious or bleeding profusely, apply pressure and call 9-1-1.

4. Get medical attention. The injured staff member should go immediately to an urgent care facility (for superficial wounds) or emergency room (for deep or profusely bleeding wounds). Even seemingly benign bites can become infected, and early intervention is essential. Immediate medical care can reduce the chances of more severe complications. The employee should note on the intake forms that they were sent for treatment by their employer.

5. Document the incident. Make note of the bite in both the team member's employee file and the patient's file. A dog that has bitten anyone in the practice should be flagged for all subsequent visits, and future attending team members should be made aware ahead of the visit. If necessary, create a plan in tandem with the owner to ensure that another bite does not occur.

6. Check in with all team members who witnessed the bite. As a team, review the events leading up to the bite and identify what might have been done differently. Was the dog properly restrained? Did it show signs of aggression or agitation? After identifying the sequence of events, encourage all staff members to take a moment to collect themselves. While running the risk of patientinflicted injuries is an inherent part of veterinary practice, witnessing bites— particularly serious ones—can be unsettling.

7. File a claim with your workers' compensation insurance carrier. Workers' compensation provides coverage in the event a practice employee is injured on the job, and dog bites constitute an on-the-job injury. This coverage will provide financial assistance and cover the bite victim's medical visit and subsequent care.

8. Follow your county's rabies reporting and observation guidelines. If a bite breaks the skin, report the incident to your county Animal Control and follow their rabies vaccination

and quarantine guidelines. You will need to submit rabies observation paperwork; protocols may differ based on the patient's vaccination history, potential exposures, etc.

9. Review handling best practices at your next team meeting. The team should review the incident and identify ways to reduce the risk of bites moving forward. Make sure all staff members who handle patients recognize the signs of fear or anxiety or other signs of an impending bite. Known fearful or aggressive dogs should not be handled alone. The AVMA Trust program has an employee training module on small animal restraint and bite prevention. To learn more or to register your team for this complimentary training, email us at support@avmaplitsafety.com or visit the AVMA PLIT Education Center (login required). Additional complimentary training modules are also available.

What should I do if a client is bitten?

Clients should not be allowed to restrain their own animal for an exam or treatment, regardless of whether they offer to help or not. Doing so creates an unnecessary risk for all involved. However, in the event that a client is bitten by their own dog—or if someone in the waiting room is bitten by another client's dog—follow steps 1-3 above. Recommend that the bite victim seek medical care and be sure to document that this step was taken. Additionally, document the altercation in the patient's file.

An injury to a client is not covered by workers' compensation coverage—because the injured person is not an employee. However, the incident could be covered under the treating veterinarian's or practice owner's professional liability policy (depending on the situation) or the practice's general liability coverage (if a client is bitten by a dog that is not their own). Be sure to notify the appropriate carrier immediately. Once they have the details of the incident, the carrier can advise you on how best to proceed. If a client is bitten by an animal they do not own, have the injured client exchange information with the dog's owner. The clinic should not offer to pay for any medical visits or expenses, nor should the practice treat the client's wound beyond first aid to staunch any bleeding. Call 9-1-1 in a true emergency.

Lastly, when time allows, consider reviewing your exam room and waiting room policies. Remind clients that all patients must be properly restrained in waiting areas. And take steps to help reduce triggers for dogs that react out of fear or anxiety. Offer the client the option of pre-visit medications to help reduce their dog's fear and stress before they arrive at the clinic.

By making sure employees are well-trained in proper animal handling and bite prevention, practices can help reduce the likelihood of dog bites. Register your team for this

complimentary training by emailing us at support@avmaplitsafety.com or visiting the AVMA PLIT Education Center (login required).

Sources:

1. https://www.avma.org/events/national-dog-bite-prevention-week

2. https://www.avmaplit.com/safety-and-employee-training/online-modules/