

By Anna Dunlop

STORIES FROM *the storm*

cover story



When Cyclone Gabrielle decimated the North Island in February, veterinary professionals went above and beyond to help affected animals. *VetScript* shares the experiences of some of those in the worst-affected regions of Tairāwhiti and Hawke's Bay.

SALLY NEWALL

Sally is a veterinarian who lives on a sheep and beef farm in Patoka.

The cyclone washed away our only bridge to Napier, so Patoka was completely cut off. Ours is a dairy farming district of about 700 people and I was the only veterinarian. For the first 48 hours I had no communication channels and was trapped on my farm, but once I was able to get to Patoka I realised the extent of the damage caused by slips. That's when I knew things were going to get very serious very quickly.

Patoka Hall became the hub for the local fire and emergency crew, and I based myself there. My primary concern was how to access animal feed – we have a lot of working dogs, cats and even chickens in this area. I put the word out on social media and received an incredible number of donations of animal feed supplies. That was a great relief for the community – a friend of mine told me she thought she was going to have to shoot her dogs because she'd run out of food for them.

Local veterinary clinics quickly helicoptered in basic emergency supplies – stitch-up kits and antibiotics – so I set myself up in a temporary clinic in the hall and started treating animals. It was first-opinion stuff across the board, from small animals to large animals. I saw calves with pneumonia and lots of significant injuries in other animals, particularly working dogs who had been caught in barbed wire in slips. I treated a horse with choke, and even stapled up a teenage girl's pet chicken – something I certainly hadn't done before. It had been attacked by dogs and had a gaping wound around its neck. I cleaned it, put in around 30 staples and gave it some antibiotics and anti-inflammatories – and it survived. Apparently it's still laying eggs.

A week after the cyclone, a small boat was positioned at the river to take people out of the district and



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get supplies in. It meant I could send serious cases to town to be treated, and I also received vaccinations and flea and worm products so I could keep on top of routine treatments. I've now set up a little veterinary clinic in my sleepout at home and I'm operating out of there.

Farmers have had it particularly tough. They've lost fences, infrastructure, waterlines and huge areas of farmland to extensive slips, and a lot of stock has died. They had to dry off their cows immediately after the cyclone, as the milk couldn't be collected. One farmer had shorn his lambs a week before the cyclone and he lost many of them to hypothermia. The lack of access also meant farmers were struggling to offload stock – and after the first couple of weeks this became the biggest challenge. A mud culvert bridge across the Mangaone River was set up three weeks after the cyclone, but crossing it was weather dependent and it could only be used during daylight hours in a four-wheel drive – no heavy vehicles. People with sheep had to transport them down to the river, drove them across the bridge and load them onto waiting trucks. We managed to off-load 36 bulls (out of 500 that needed it) by using a tractor and

stock crate to tow them in loads of 13 across the Tutaekuri River, then putting them onto a truck on the other side.

A Bailey bridge finally opened at the end of March, and while it was a huge relief for the community, it doesn't mean the problems are over. Now farmers have to think about how to source winter feed and get through the cold months. The mental health toll has been huge – people get through the first few weeks on adrenaline, but when they start thinking about what it will mean for the next few months or even years, it becomes overwhelming. However, the help has been amazing, from the donated veterinary supplies and feed coordination services to the volunteers turning up with trailer loads of fenceposts. I don't think people realise how much positivity that brings to a district when it's going through something like this.

Above: Sally treating a chicken with a neck wound. Clockwise from top right: Dave and his neighbours rescuing people by boat; a helicopter drops off supplies; the mud culvert bridge over the Mangaone River; a working dog with an injured foot; for weeks, residents of Patoka could only cross the river by boat.

DAVE KRUGER

Dave is an equine veterinarian who works for Vet Services Hawke's Bay in Hastings. He lives in Puketapu.

When the cyclone hit I couldn't get out of my house for a few days – I live on a hill next to a valley, and my property became an island due to the flooding. On Tuesday morning I launched my boat half way down our road (now known as Breckenridge boat ramp), and collected a couple of neighbours and their dogs from the roof of their house. I saw about 18 people on the packhouse roof of one of the orchards – they were rescued two at a time by a guy in a private helicopter. He did a fantastic job.

I managed to get off my property three days after the cyclone and I immediately saw horses at my neighbour's place who were in trouble. I made it to Hastings to get a water container and some feed, but I nearly didn't make it back because the last of the bridges – Fernhill Bridge – was moving and looked like it was going to go. They eventually let residents through and I was able to get food and water to the horses. Unfortunately, some of the surviving horses had to be euthanased due to the severity of their wounds.

In addition, four horses turned up near my house after swimming across the newly formed lake with covers on. They had some awful injuries from swimming through fences, but I treated them as best I could. Every wound became infected because of the mud and water. Some of the horses made it through – I did my last bandage change five weeks after the cyclone – but others had injuries that were too severe to treat, such as open carpal joints and injured feet. Unfortunately, I know of at least 30 horses who died or are missing.

Three days after the cyclone I managed to get back to the clinic in Hastings. It's a mixed animal practice and we had many injured companion animals, as well as horses. I was out



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in the field focusing on horses. I saw several with pneumonia and sinus infections from aspirating water. We had some great responses from horse organisations – Waikato Equine Veterinary Centre flew in bandages and other supplies very quickly. In fact the whole community response was fantastic. Some guys driving past when I was working on horses asked if I needed supplies. I had no idea who they were – I still don’t – but they were loading up their car with stuff and getting it out to the people who needed it.

Due to the destruction and lack of fences, many surviving horses have been moved to Central Hawke’s Bay or to Manawatū. A lot of people offered to look after them. Thankfully, despite being a bit spooked by the rising water, my three horses are okay. I’ve taken their shoes off and they’re having a holiday.



This bridge in Hawke's Bay was washed away by floodwater

TERESA HOYLE

Theresa is a veterinarian who works for CoastVet, a mixed practice in Wairoa.

Our clinic in Wairoa wasn’t affected by floodwater, so we acted as an evacuation centre for animals in the area. At the peak, all our cages and our isolation ward were full, predominantly with cats and dogs – mostly pets but also some strays – who were very wet, cold and traumatised. We also had a turtle who was a bit sad when he arrived, but he dried out nicely.

With so many people displaced, finding safe and appropriate places for their pets was an added stress, so our clinic housed them temporarily.

Masterpet and the Gisborne SPCA Centre sourced us some crates, so we were able to get some cats back to their owners. The last little dog we were looking after went home at the end of March.

Since the cyclone we’ve seen a steep rise in the number of parvovirus cases. This is a high parvo area, and the floodwaters spread the disease among properties, including many that had unvaccinated puppies. Unfortunately most people couldn’t afford to treat them and our clinic had very limited space. Some managed to pull through with treatment at home, but others weren’t so lucky.

It’s incredible how animals can survive. One of my clients thought her

cat had drowned, but she turned up two weeks after the cyclone, skinny but otherwise unharmed. It was a bit of a miracle.

JASON CLARK

Jason is a director and production animal veterinarian at VetsOne in Hastings. He lives in Taradale.

In the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle, Taradale was completely cut off, so initially I couldn’t get to the clinic. We had no power or

Houses and cars were buried in silt



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communications at home, so I had no idea what was happening in other parts of the region. It wasn't until several days later, when the odd message made it through, that I realised the full scale of the devastation.

I managed to see several animals around Taradale in the first few days – mainly horses. A lot had wounds around their lower limbs from being trapped in fences or dragged across sharp things by the floodwaters, so the work involved managing these, providing pain relief and antibiotics. The only supplies I had were those that had been in my car on the Monday night before the cyclone, so I was just triaging the animals until they could get to safe locations for further treatment. Horses around the region were evacuated to the Montana Horse Arena and veterinarians from our clinic and Vet Services treated horses as they came in – it was a mass triage/treatment event.

I made it to the clinic in Hastings on Saturday. The communications blackout meant nobody could get hold

of us, so a few of our veterinarians who live on the Hastings side of the river were coming in and sleeping in the clinic in case emergencies arrived in the night. I was really proud of how dedicated they were to the whole animal welfare response. I joined people from the SPCA and Massey University's Veterinary Emergency Response Team and we slogged around in the mud in Pākōwhai rounding up stray animals that had been left high and dry by the floods. We triaged any we found and treated them as needed. In addition to all the generous contributions that arrived from clinics and companies outside the region, our fantastic product reps were getting in their own cars and driving supplies to us, so we never ran out of anything.

That first week after the cyclone was hectic, but on Sunday/Monday everything went eerily quiet. By that stage anything that could have been treated had been treated, and anything that hadn't survived was gone. The mental health impacts of this have been huge, even for the staff who were in town and not directly affected. Every day for weeks, people came into the clinic telling them horror stories about having to evacuate and returning to find their homes gone and their animals drowned. This was repeated

over and over and caused a lot of secondary trauma and stress among our staff. Even just driving to and from work every day, past silted houses and pools of mud, has been difficult.

On the positive side, I've heard some amazingly heroic stories as well. One that stands out is about a horse trainer and his neighbours who tied garden hoses around themselves and swam into the floodwaters to lead their horses to higher ground. This was a raging river that stretched across the whole Esk Valley. It took incredible bravery to go out and save those animals.

KAREN PHILLIPS

Karen is a mixed practice veterinarian at CHB Vets in Waipukurau. During the cyclone she was also chair of the Hawke's Bay Rural Advisory Group. She lives in Poukawa.

I was at the clinic on the Tuesday morning when the roads started to flood badly. I decided to shut the clinic and send everyone home, and about 20 minutes later the Waipawa River breached its banks and flooded most of Waipawa and the surrounding area. One of my staff had to be evacuated. Luckily the clinic wasn't flooded, but we couldn't get back to it until about 48 hours later.

The Hawke's Bay Rural Advisory Group (RAG) immediately kicked into action. The group comprises primary industry and community representatives, and our role is to reduce the impacts of adverse events on rural communities and enhance their recovery. We were involved in gathering and collating information, getting advice to people and helping to coordinate the response. The initial challenge was actually getting hold of the group members because we had no communication, so for the first two or three days we were just feeling our way

around. Central Hawke's Bay wasn't as badly affected as the north part of the region; when I went to that area I realised quickly that this was beyond a regional response – we needed outside help fast. That's when the government agencies started to arrive.

Once the clinic reopened, we had huge problems with access and supply – nothing was coming in or going out. But people made massive efforts to help us out. Our SVS rep Theresa drove up with all our supplies and picked up samples to take back to the laboratory. She did that for all the accessible clinics in the area and it made such a difference to us.

The community really came together and looked out for each other. I spoke to a man who had spent the night with his wife and two dogs in his boat tied up to a tree while their house flooded. In the morning they found their sheep hanging on to the top of a fence and managed to rescue them. Then their neighbour's goat came swimming over to them and they rescued him too. The neighbour had lost his house and land, and was absolutely rapt that his goat had survived.

RAG had done a lot of civil defence planning and training, and certain weak points – such as communications – had been identified but never acted on. Now Starlink has been put in around the district. However, I'm not sure how we could have better prepared for this. I don't think we could have done many things differently because no one could have foreseen how fast it was going to happen and how bad it was going to be.

BRENDAN JAMES

Brendan is the General Manager of Vet Services Hawke's Bay, which has mixed practice clinics in Hastings, Napier, Waipukurau and Dannevirke.

Luckily none of our clinics were badly affected by the cyclone – we lost power in Napier for around a week, but the Hastings clinic was up and running

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again very quickly. Communication was the main problem, but we managed to keep in touch with each other and our clients through WhatsApp and Messenger. Three staff had to move out of their homes, which is actually quite a low number considering we employ more than 100 people. One of our Napier veterinarians was very badly affected and the two others are living elsewhere temporarily.

The emergencies we saw in the first few days were dominated by equine – horses that had been injured while trying to swim and were sick from taking in too much water and being in contaminated silt.

After the first week we started to see some gastrointestinal issues in dogs from the worst-affected areas. We also saw diseases we wouldn't ordinarily expect to see at that time of year – leptospirosis and salmonella. One of the biggest areas of concern for farmers was fly strike, but that has largely been taken care of now. Going forward it will be about helping farmers plan for winter, which is going to be extremely tough. The problems for farmers have only really started, and supporting them is definitely weighing on the minds of our large animal veterinarians.

From a business point of view, we really don't know what it means. At the most basic level, we know there are fewer horses and livestock around. I suppose the thing we're most worried about is what the regional economy looks like when it's been completely decimated. What are the flow-on effects of that? Currently, we just can't quantify it. ^{vs}

In Patoka, farmers used tractors to tow stock crates loaded with cattle across rivers

