

Challenges of dealing with wildlife in Central West NSW

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Introduction

Currently there is no dedicated wildlife facility in the central west of NSW that offers staffed 24-hour veterinary emergency wildlife care. This places an enormous responsibility on the volunteer wildlife carers who are presented with injured or ill wildlife outside of normal veterinary business hours, especially when they are located in remote towns far from the nearest veterinary hospital or clinic. It may not be practical, possible, or financially viable, for wildlife carers to be taking wildlife to their local veterinarian after normal business hours. This has the potential to create a stressful situation for the carer in possession of an animal that is seriously ill / injured and in urgent need of veterinary help.

Taronga Western Plains Wildlife Hospital (TWPWH) is situated within Taronga Western Plains Zoo, Dubbo, in regional NSW. In addition to delivering veterinary care to the Zoo's animal collection, the TWPWH provides a fully funded veterinary and rehabilitation service for free-ranging Australian native wildlife. A proportion of our cases are managed as outpatients while they are in the temporary care of external volunteer wildlife carers, in part due to hospital capacity and no after hours staffing. The hospital is open 7 days a week from 8 am to 4.30 pm for wildlife admissions. First opinion, second opinion and referral consultations are by appointment only, generally on Tuesdays and Thursdays, unless prior arrangements are made based on case urgency.

The Wildlife Service sees approximately 600 wildlife cases per year. Wildlife carers may travel vast distances to bring injured or ill wildlife in their care for veterinary consultation, often due to a lack of other options closer to home.

The hospital routinely sees wildlife carers from at least six different wildlife groups covering areas of the Upper Hunter through to far Western NSW. We are seeing an increase in veterinary referrals from the regional veterinary practices that may conduct initial veterinary assessments and we offer diagnostic, medical and surgical advice over the phone to veterinarians dealing with compromised wildlife.

Veterinary services

Veterinarians are trained and licenced to assess, anaesthetise and euthanase animals, diagnose disease, perform surgery and prescribe appropriate treatments.¹ Veterinary medicines are often necessary for the humane management of stress and illness in animals, including wildlife. However, indiscriminate use of veterinary drugs can lead to problems including the widespread development of antibiotic resistance, damaging side effects in patients and the perpetuation of human substance abuse.

Consequently, medicines are classified into various categories or 'schedules' under Federal law and the availability of the various schedules of medicines to the public are

regulated. Many veterinary drugs are classified in schedule 4 requiring them to be prescribed by a registered practitioner for the treatment of a nominated animal patient. It is no longer acceptable or legal for wildlife carers to be in possession of a range of veterinary drugs for their use without veterinary supervision.

Building a good relationship between carer and the local veterinary practice is essential to the volunteer carer's ability to obtain a diagnosis and to provide appropriate treatment to animals in their care. Of course there will be times when a veterinarian will not be available and the wildlife carer is faced with the dilemma of dealing with injured wildlife alone. In these situations the carer can only do their best with the knowledge and expertise that is available to them at the time to keep the animal quiet and as comfortable as possible until they can get veterinary assistance.

In the absence of professional help in regards to drug administration, it is often better to administer nothing than to give an animal medication that has not specifically been prescribed for it and/or to give an inappropriate dose. There will be occasions where over-the-counter medication can be given, when indicated, under the guidance of the wildlife group protocols e.g. toltrazuril (Baycox®) for coccidia treatment or nystatin (Nilstat®) when thrush is suspected as the cause of diarrhoea. It is important that doses are calculated and administered carefully based on accurate body weight of the patient, as under- and over-dosing of all medications can have significant health implications, especially in unstable or dehydrated patients.

Veterinary cost

The financial cost of veterinary services appears to vary depending on individual private veterinary practice policy on wildlife work. Some wildlife groups with proactive fundraising teams may be able to cover costs incurred for veterinary treatment. Many practices offer heavy discounts on the services and treatments they provide for wildlife. Nevertheless, the individual wildlife carer often struggles with the basic costs of caring for wildlife without the added expense of veterinary treatment, even if this is discounted. This may create a situation where the animals are denied appropriate treatment due to financial pressure. Often carers will drive hundreds of kilometres to bring animals to the TWPWH for our professional and government-funded service.

- **Ways we can improve carer/veterinarian relationship are:** support undergraduate and post-graduate educational opportunities for veterinarians to learn the specialised care requirements of Australia's unique wildlife from those with experience. This has the potential to increase not only the knowledge base, but also confidence and interest in helping wildlife. If individual veterinarians and practices feel inspired to help wildlife they may be more inclined to donate their professional time and skills to this work.
- Effective carers work together with their local veterinarian for the benefit of the patient, mutually sharing experience, knowledge and ideas, remembering to be grateful and respectful of professional advice and time devoted to

helping the patient. Requesting referral to or second opinion advice from a dedicated wildlife vet is valid, especially for difficult or unusual cases, and can result in a learning experience for both the carer and the primary clinician.

- Wildlife groups can enlist the help of the public to fundraise for veterinary services through social media sites like Facebook and in their communities.

Safe and effective wildlife rescue

With the increasing urban development in Dubbo we are seeing an increase in macropod-related phone enquires. These enquires typically involve macropods injured due to motor vehicle accidents, fence entanglements or distressed animals in suburban backyards. TWPWH is not funded, equipped or staffed to routinely offer an ambulatory emergency response service to attend to these calls. As such these calls are often referred to WIRES volunteers to attend the scene and, if required, to transport the animal to our hospital for assessment and treatment. Occasionally we may advise the person to contact Dubbo Police to euthanase the animal if the reported injuries are significant, life-threatening and untreatable. On occasion, staff availability and schedule permitting, TWPWH staff members have attended an external rescue scene when location, size or temperament of the injured individual has made it problematic for WIRES to assist. Most commonly the patient in these situations is anaesthetised via chemical restraint using a projectile dart and safely taken to the Wildlife Hospital for assessment, treatment and rehabilitation where possible.

These scenarios highlight the need for the establishment of a wildlife emergency response ambulance in the Dubbo/Central West region. Ideally this ambulance would be staffed by trained wildlife care personnel who are authorised to use chemical restraint techniques and provide appropriate first aid at the scene. The ability to safely administer anaesthesia to a large frightened macropod significantly reduces the risk of serious injury to rescue personnel and bystanders and reduces stress and further injury to the animal. This, in turn, greatly facilitates and hastens appropriate assessment and treatment of injuries.

Other potentially dangerous situations that could benefit from such a service include bat, large raptor and wombat rescue and response to mass mortalities. There is a need to generate awareness, funding and commitment from local stakeholders to get this idea to become a reality.

Education and further training

At TWPWH one of our many roles is to assist in the exchange of knowledge with our clients, the wildlife carers. One issue we see commonly is the lack of awareness or understanding of the risks to individuals of contracting zoonotic diseases from wildlife in their care. We implore any wildlife carers to spend some time researching the potential zoonotic risks associated with the species in their care and implement preventative measures to reduce the risks to themselves and those around them.

Due to the distance from most major centres, Central West NSW carers may feel isolated from training opportunities as it can be hard to get specialists to come to remote areas for training days. Additionally, the carer may struggle to get away to attend training courses. Reputable online and government resources are becoming increasingly available to help address some of these challenges.

Carer fatigue

The harsh reality of working/volunteering in any animal-related rescue situation means there will always be more animals in need than carers available to look after them. Another issue is carer work can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Some suggested ways to reduce carer fatigue are:

- Learn to identify how many animals you can physically, financially and emotionally care for at any one time. Sometimes you will have to say no to taking on new animals and that is perfectly acceptable.
- Learn to accept you can't save them all but you can do a great job with the ones you have.
- Learn to accept that you might have to pass animals onto different carers or care groups if you are 'full'.
- Plan a break every year, to give you a much-deserved holiday, even if it's just a weekend away. Call on friends and family to help out if needed.
- Look after yourself, because the world needs kind, caring people to stick around for as long as possible. Seek professional help if you are struggling with the pressures of caring.
- Learn to identify if you need a break from caring and take it. Maybe you can do some fundraising for your group while you're catching up on some much-needed sleep, so you still feel included.

Other significant challenges for wildlife carers in Central West NSW

Probably the most challenging part of working with wildlife in remote or regional NSW is the type of animals that routinely come into care. Macropods, wombats, emus and birds of prey are commonly presented to wildlife care groups. These species can be large, powerful and potentially dangerous individuals who require specific expertise, housing and often long-term care. An orphaned joey could be in care for up to 18 months until it is finally rehabilitated and released.

Volunteering to be a wildlife carer is a significant commitment and it can be difficult to maintain a large group of interested individuals who can cope with the highs and lows of wildlife work. Suitable release sites may be difficult to find due to habitat loss, attitudes of landholders toward common species, hunting activities and environmental pressures such as droughts.

There is currently no designated raptor rehabilitation facility with large eagle flight aviaries in the region nor sufficient koala holding facilities for the demand, with several carers forced to manage seriously ill koalas themselves until they can be transferred to the TWPWH or Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, pending available hospital space. Our hospital can only hold two wild long-term koala inpatients at a time due to limited suitable housing and browse resourcing/availability. There are currently no veterinarians in the Central West region that have the facilities to treat and hospitalise injured venomous snakes.

A lack of empathy towards our native wildlife can often be seen in regional areas, with many seeing the common species as pests, placing little value on saving them if orphaned, ill or injured.

Conclusion

Working with wildlife has its challenges, rewards and frustrations. To be truly successful in our quest to care for wildlife we must engage and inspire our community regarding the plight of these unique animals. Wildlife work is a team effort: from the member of public who stopped and checked the pouch of the kangaroo, the police officer that ended the suffering of the injured mother, the carer who raised the joey, the sewing club who donated pouches, the veterinarian who offers their time to manage any health concerns, the citizen who donated money at the Bunning's sausage sizzle for the carer to buy animal food, to the landholder that offers their property as a safe haven for the rehabilitated kangaroo, we all work together for the greater good.

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References

1. <https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/#/view/regulation/2013/490/full>