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BACK TO BASICS

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When I was asked to do a talk on “Back to Basics” of wildlife care, I thought “how appropriate!” Kununurra can be a very basic place, on many levels. We are physically isolated from help in all directions, we are frequently at the mercy of extremes of climate, and we have a diversity of people that creates levels of care of both animals and people that can be nothing short of bizarre.

As I am sure all of you here at this conference will appreciate, being a wildlife carer presents a 24 hour a day, 7 days a week challenge, *wherever* you live. We drive down the road and find an injured victim in our path, or people roll up to our house/work place/farm or vet centre holding a box/bag/blanket/cage or bucket containing another bitten/squashed/orphaned or run over native creature.

Whoever we are, *wherever* we are, we are then instantly presented with 3 questions...

What is it?

What happened to it?

And often.....*What the hell am I going to do with it?!!*

(Remembering... that if it is a bat, maybe you shouldn't be doing anything with it unless you have been vaccinated....)

To discover the answers to these 3 questions we begin questioning the finder/presenter for what they know of the history of this patient (where it was found, the circumstances in which it was presented to them etc..) and then head off to tackle the true basics of wildlife care: to examine, assess, diagnose and treat our new patient.

In order to do this we have to:

1. Identify our patient and then restrain it...usually just when everyone else has gone out!
2. Examine the extent of its injuries....without being bitten or scratched
3. Decide if this individual CAN be saved....always a tough call
4. Decide on a treatment plan and/or contact the vet.
5. Euthanase the severely injured or find an appropriate house for those to be treated.

It is worthwhile remembering that all of these steps are the same for us all as wildlife carers, vets and non-vets alike. We all undertake these steps on different levels, and the one thing that I would like to say to all carers, is to trust your own gut feelings. Never underestimate your own powers of observation and in the absence of outside help, follow your instincts and treat each new patient as your experience guides you to do.

Many people discuss patients with me that have been seen by a vet inexperienced in treating wildlife. At times, they have been given a diagnosis that they doubt is right, but generally feel powerless to convince the vet otherwise. I imagine that this must be a very frustrating situation to be in, but stick to your guns, you are so often right! I do not have the answer as to how to solve this situation, but talk to another experienced carer, find another vet that will treat wildlife, or maybe contact your local zoo or wildlife care body for more support.

My carers teach me new ways to treat our cases every day, and I always take note of any unusual observations or new symptoms that they report to me. Take notice of these things, and share them with your vet or other carers. They are valuable observations that I do believe are relevant to the ongoing and changing daily care that each patient requires. A good wildlife vet will take notice of your observations and treat them seriously.

IDENTIFICATION:

Remembering that the first problem to be solved, is that this needs to be achieved without your patient escaping...

1. Mammal, bird or reptile?
2. Dangerous? Weapons?.....claws, beak, feet or teeth?
3. Approximate age....orphaned or immature, juvenile, adult or aged?
4. Male or female? (I LOVE mammals for this one...)

ASSESSMENT OF INJURIES:

1. What is the general state of your patient? Weak/strong? Collapsed/standing? Bleeding?
2. Always remember to check the contents of the transport box or carrier. It can often reveal snippets of information you might not immediately notice from your patient.....small drops of blood from wounds hidden by feathers, the nature of any faeces or maybe an indication of what this patient has been feeding on from what it has regurgitated during transport.

3. Develop a systematic approach to examining each patient:

- ✿ Check head, face, eyes, ears and mouth... ***and then give homeopathic treatment for shock, bleeding and trauma.*** EVERY carer can safely use this wonderful form of safe and effective treatment, which will not interfere with any future medications in any way, and which I know significantly supports the wellbeing of all patients.
- ✿ Examine limbs, tail or wings
- ✿ Check the body, chest and abdomen.....wounds, deformity, bruising, laboured breathing? Is there trauma to skin or feathers?

TREATABLE OR NOT?

Creatures with amputations or severe fractures, especially those of the spine or long bones, will usually need humane euthanasia, particularly in macropods and birds. Penetrating injuries to the chest or abdomen are often fatal, though reptiles in particular can have some incredible injuries that they can survive. Severe head injuries and crushing wounds from car accidents are frequently fatal, though again we have had some reptiles recover from phenomenal trauma.

Veterinary assistance may well be needed to come to a definite diagnosis and prognosis, but I do find that most carers will instinctively know when a creature can be saved or not. Some cases will require more time for full assessment, and these cases may well require pain relief, shock treatment and fluids before a final assessment is made.

TREATMENT:

All patients, even those to be euthanased, can be given ongoing treatment for shock and trauma throughout the assessment period. More and more people are experiencing the benefits of using complementary therapies on their animals as well as themselves, and this is certainly true for treating wildlife. Natural products such as Rescue Remedy, which is made from natural bush flowers essences, are safe when used in small doses and it is an excellent treatment for stress and shock. It can be used together with Homeopathic remedies, which work by employing the bodies own energy force to create a healing change, and truly are very effective and easy to use.

DR SARAH SAYS: WARMTH, FLUIDS AND ARNICA!!!

All carers can have a supply of homeopathic remedies on hand, and I do believe it can make a difference to some patients living or dying. Every case that we see come into care is a wild creature that will be experiencing significant stress due to being handled by human beings. Scientists have at last proven to themselves that water can retain a memory, or energy imprint, and so have come a step closer to convincing the more left brained thinkers of how homeopathy works. Those of us that use homeopathy regularly have seen it work time and time again, and have experienced the evidence.

These remedies can become a part of our treatment plan before we seek veterinary help as well as for those patients that are not severely injured and needing veterinary assessment. It is great to continue with these treatments for the first 2 to 3 days that patients are in care. I have attached a list of some basic first aid remedies that we use at the Kimberley Vet Centre, and I am very happy to discuss these further with anyone who is interested.

Hopefully, all carers will have access to a sympathetic vet to compassionately euthanase those patients that cannot be saved. A job that always pulls at all our heartstrings.

Patients to remain in care have a number of basic requirements to be met:

- ☀ Warmth – especially for birds, as their large surface area to volume means that they can burn a lot of energy if they have to keep themselves warm. It is important for all creatures though, even for us in the tropics.
- ☀ Fluids and energy – to replace those already lost, and to meet maintenance requirements. I love Polyaid for birds but in a pinch, honey is always better than nothing.
- ☀ Wound care – natural methods of wound care are all safe and effective, and can employ things that most of us have in the home. Salty water, 1 in 10 vinegar in water, honey and aloe vera are all great for wound cleaning and treatment. Betadine (Iodine) can be used for very contaminated wounds, but always dilute it. Be very careful with Tea Tree and oils on wildlife, they can be very strong. **DON'T USE DETTOL**. My favourite wound treatment of all though is called Dermaclens, and is a combination of weak acids (like vinegar) in an oily base that hydrate dead cells, and leave live cells unaffected. I have used this on every type of wound, often for very long periods of time, and it is absolutely wonderful.
- ☀ Feeding – can often be the greatest challenge of all when treating native animals, and each new case can mean much experimenting and often some serious wrestling....crop feeding Black Cockatoos springs to mind. Having a network of carers can help give us access to a variety of different foods (mice, mealworms, cockroaches etc) and there is a great variety of recipes available for all manner of babies and species these days. We frequently contact others to find out what to feed our next arrival.
- ☀ Housing – is often the other challenge we face at the vet centre, as so often our cages are very full. Small cages are usually required for the first stages of assessment and then a gradual move to larger cages generally follows. We are lucky to have one or two carers with properties out of town, so the primary care of our patients usually happens at the vet, before they move out of town where they are soft released. Safe housing can be a critical factor in preventing patients injuring themselves, and speaking from much experience finding cages that prevent escape is the other serious challenge. Over the years we have had sugar gliders, echidnas, snakes and flying foxes escape what I thought were very secure cages. Finding a corpse in a deep dark corner two days later is always so disappointing.
- ☀ PEACE AND QUIET – every wildlife patient we see is shocked, stressed and traumatised to some degree. No matter how gentle our handling and careful our treatment, it involves some degree of stress to the individual. An undisturbed spot is very important for all cases, and I prefer to cover all birds, at least partially, for the first few days in care. Give them all the treatment they need, as well as the wonderful hands on healing that you want to give them, and then leave them to rest.
- ☀ “Trouble shooting” – every single day that I am involved in treating animals, I see something new arise that I did not anticipate.... a patient gets stuck in a cage we've used forever, joeys find a new and bizarre way to injure their feet, or kill themselves eating soap, birds get caught in bandages that you thought were secure, someone else drowns in a really shallow water bowl, or the head injured Bandicoot that has **FINALLY** stopped walking in circles escapes its cage and manages to break **INTO** the Wedgetailed Eagles enclosure, and becomes the first live tucker that Louise has eaten since one of the dumb chooks ran into her cage and wouldn't come out.

Nature in the raw is an inherent part of the world of the wildlife carer, and we all have these moments that teach us something new every single day. There will always be a new problem to solve with creative thinking! I think it is what keeps a lot of us so interested....

But next time one of these sad events happens to one of your charges, just remember:

.....it happens to ALL of us at some stage.

Thank you for coming “Back to Basics” with me. Even though none of this information will be new to you, I think it serves us all to be reminded of the simple steps that we all instinctively take when we are caring for our wildlife patients. I am most happy to communicate with any carers who feel I could be of help to them, and you are welcome to ring or email me and I will do my best to help.

I have immense respect for all those that give their time and energy to wildlife care and rescue. I know how time consuming and labour intensive that it truly is. I do believe that our creatures are suffering greatly in our challenged and damaged environment, and if human beings do not pay them greater respect, then our children’s children may only experience these animals in zoos or wildlife parks.

Keep up the great work folks, the creatures thank you all.