



HERE'S A SECRET ...

Most Things Aren't Your Fault, Even If You Think They Are

Dana Varble, DVM, CAE
Chief Veterinary Officer, NAVC

I wonder what I look like to this little guy, I thought as I stared through the aquarium glass at the dyspneic hamster within. Do I look like a kind veterinarian trying my best to help him in his most desperate hour, or do I more closely resemble the fish-eye lens view of a cartoonish monster? I tried to process all I had learned about small mammals at school, mentally scanning notes and flipping through textbooks, but as the hamster's breathing got more desperate my sense of urgency did as well. I had to do something! I swiftly grasped the hamster in a small towel to save my fingertips from rodent incisors, and as I turned the edges of the towel over to begin my exam ... he had stopped breathing! In fact, he was very much dead, and I felt very much that I had killed him.

About 2.5 seconds after the hamster's breathing stopped, I remembered a clinical professor's advice that small mammals should not be handled when they are dyspneic. My mind exploded in about 12 directions at once; everything from being sued to losing my veterinary license crossed my mind. At the center of this explosion

was the feeling that this situation was *my* fault and only my fault. After explaining what had happened to some very understanding hamster owners, an explanation they took in stride, their perspective was a healthy combination of remorse and resignation; after all, hamsters don't live forever. I did not share their calm. I was shaking, absolutely panicked.

After the owners' understanding response, a good portion of my catastrophic fears seemed less founded, but I was still certain that the death of this animal was on me. To regain my composure, I conferred with a colleague. "Oh well, bound to happen," she replied. My jaw dropped. "Huh?" "Well, if picking him up killed him, his disease must have been pretty progressed and the prognosis was grave. Don't you agree?" Yeah, when you put it that way, I did agree!

It would have been nice to discuss the hamster's grave prognosis while he was still alive, but the reality of the situation was that my actions, my abilities, and the limits of veterinary medicine are frequently eclipsed by disease. I learned and remembered that information for the next dyspneic gerbil I consulted on, but sadly, despite my different actions, disease won that battle as well. We can and should always find ways to improve, innovate, and hone our practices, but they are still just practices, imperfect and changing. Most of the time, we are battling much bigger issues than our imperfections, and it would be pretty egotistical to think that our little actions had a bigger impact on our patients' lives than those diseases that eventually beat us all. **TVP**

Ben Kirchner

Dana Varble, DVM, CAE

This column is titled "The Secret Life of Vets" so I can talk about the secrets that really should be considered well-known truths. These are the not-so-secret secrets that can help change our thinking and our profession for the better.

