

Injury Investigations: Preventing Recurrence

Even veterinary practices with the most comprehensive safety program can have incidents that result in employee injuries, occupational illnesses, property damage, and interruptions to patient care. These practices will investigate an incident with the goal of preventing recurrence because they recognize that these injuries impact patient care and staff wellness along with the efficiency, effectiveness, and profitability of their practice.

Injuries that occur with a high level of frequency in a veterinary practice are deserving of more investigative attention. If certain injuries, such as bites and scratches, contribute to the majority of injuries in your practice, there is a risk of the staff becoming desensitized and “accepting” that these injuries are just going to happen. By making a concerted effort to identify why certain injuries occurred and ensure corrective actions are taken to reduce the likelihood of recurrence, the frequency of injuries can be reduced. This promotes a safe work environment and can have a significant impact on the operational costs these injuries have on your practice and workers’ compensation premiums.

Cal/OSHA’s required Injury and Illness Prevention Program includes a section that sets forth the policy and procedures for conducting incident investigations. This section describes who will conduct the investigation, the expected outcome of an investigation, and how corrective actions to prevent recurrence will be implemented.

The investigative process is a management responsibility and should be done soon after the incident. The investigation may be performed by the veterinary practice owner, safety/practice manager, employee’s immediate supervisor, or the individual designated in the Cal/OSHA health and safety policy for the practice.

Gathering Evidence

Fact gathering starts with a visit to the scene of the incident and interview of the injured employee and any witnesses. Let employees know from the beginning that your goal is to prevent the incident from happening again, not place blame.

For some incidents, it is worthwhile to take pictures of the accident scene to help with later review.

Interviewing Guidelines

Put the person being interviewed at ease. A simple explanation of why the investigation is being conducted

(i.e., to prevent recurrence) can help assure the individual that no one is “out to get” him or her.

Interview at the scene when possible. Visiting the scene can help the interviewer and the interviewee more accurately relate the circumstances and details involved.

Interviews should be in private. Group interviews can be counterproductive to gathering accurate facts. If a group gathers during the interview, tell them that each person will be interviewed separately to allow everyone an opportunity to relate what they saw or heard. When conflicting information is discovered, interview individuals separately to resolve conflicting details.

Ask questions that require an explanation. Ask questions that start with WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, or HOW. Avoid asking WHY questions until you think all other information has been obtained. A WHY question can put people on the defensive, so use with care.

Completing the Incident Report and Recommendations

The person performing the investigation needs to document the findings by completing the incident investigation form and provide recommendations to prevent incident recurrence.

Recommendations must address the direct (work element) and root causes of the incident. These are the two components that contribute to the cause of an incident.

- The work element is the employee act or workplace condition that directly caused the incident. An example of this is when a veterinary assistant is bitten because the proper restraint procedures were not used on a patient.
- The root cause is the system failure that allowed the work element to become deficient or to occur. Using the example above, a root cause may be restraint equipment not readily available or insufficient training.

Review the findings with the practice’s safety manager and other management members, especially those who would implement the recommendations.

The investigation process is easily dismissed when employees are responding to the daily demands of operating a veterinary practice. Let’s not overlook how these frequently occurring incidents disrupt the provision of quality patient care, staffing, and ultimately, insurance costs. ■