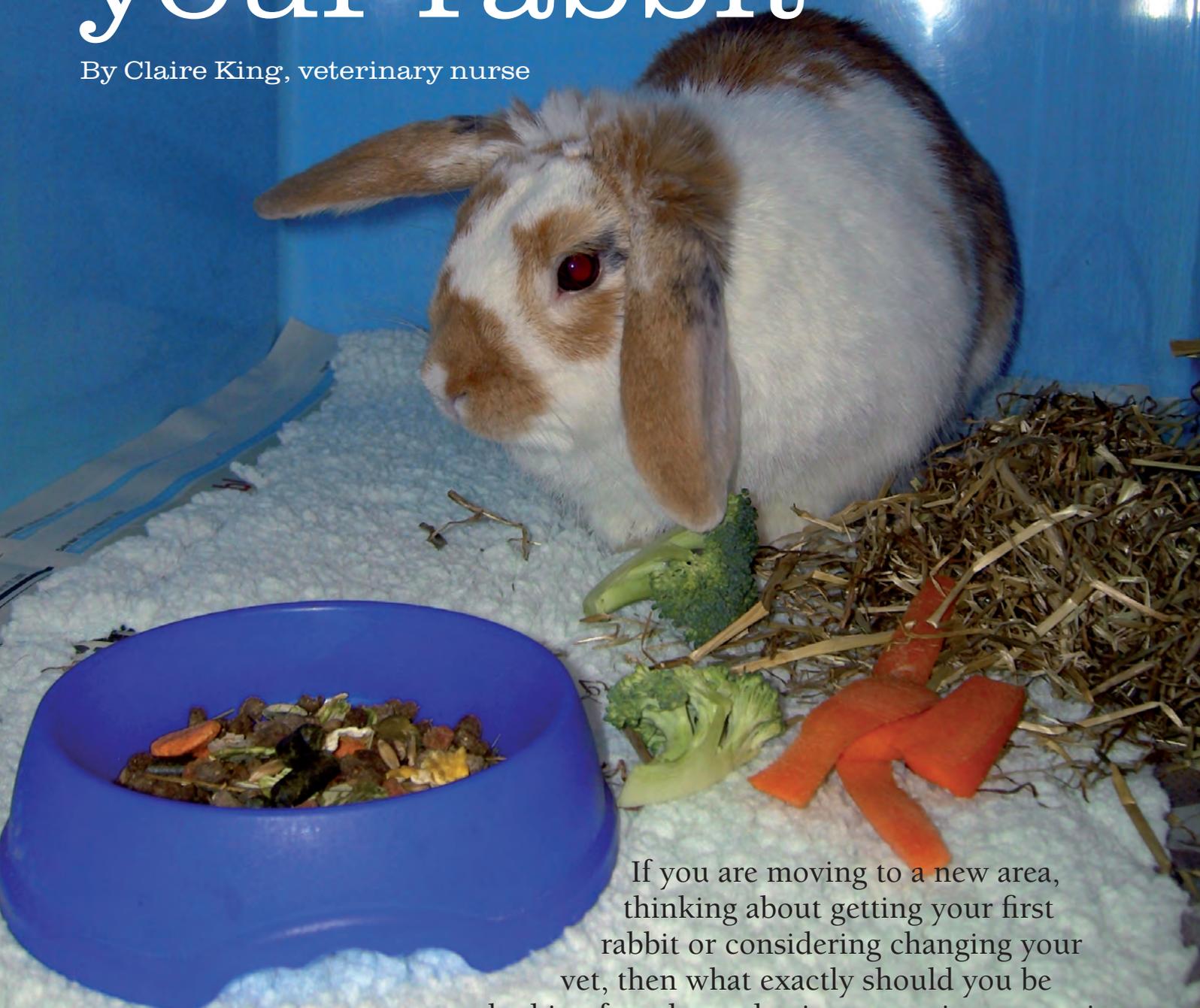


Choosing a veterinary practice for your rabbit

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All photos: C King



If you are moving to a new area, thinking about getting your first rabbit or considering changing your vet, then what exactly should you be looking for when selecting a veterinary practice to take care of your rabbit?

Are hospitalised rabbits offered a good variety of foods, including hay?



A large hospitalisation kennel is needed especially if the rabbit brings its companion

There are thousands of veterinary practices throughout the UK and just because the local veterinary practice has treated your pet dogs for the last 20 years, sadly it may not necessarily be the right place for your rabbit.

This article looks at what would make the ideal rabbit veterinary practice. Whilst it may not be possible to achieve all of these points when selecting a veterinary practice for your rabbit, it will enable you to make an informed choice as to which practice you feel is best for your rabbit.

Hospital facilities

Ideally a practice would have an individual rabbit/small furry ward, but unfortunately this is still not always the case. At the very least rabbits must be housed away from all predator species. This not only includes dogs and cats, but also ferrets, birds of prey, snakes and some large lizards. Being housed near any of these species will do little to make a rabbit feel at ease in a hospital environment.

Cages should be large enough so the rabbit can lie at full stretch and stand up on their hind legs. Hay, water and a selection of fresh food should be offered to rabbit inpatients, although it is often a good idea to bring some of your rabbit's normal food with him or her, to ensure that a familiar food is available.

Premises

Some veterinary practices are purpose built; others are renovated houses or buildings previously used for other purposes. The actual building type is pretty irrelevant. What is important is that the waiting room should be tidy, clean and have ample seating for clients. You should be able to get away

from noisy dogs who may stress your rabbit. A separate waiting area is ideal. Alternatively, some practices may offer consultations for rabbits at quieter times of day. Are there ample parking facilities on-site or close by?

Out of hours emergency care

This may not seem very important when considering which practice to choose, but it is advisable to know the out of hours care that would be available to your rabbit in an emergency situation before one may occur.

Nowadays a lot of practices no longer do their own out of hours emergency service. They may have a designated emergency service who take over their phone lines when the practice shuts or a pool of practices may get together and rotate the out of

hours service between them. If this is the case how far away may you have to travel in an emergency? Do you know if the vets who may have to treat your rabbit in an emergency are rabbit 'savvy'?

All of these points need to be considered as you will not want to make a 30-mile dash with a desperately ill rabbit to get emergency treatment.

Consultation hours

It is important to find out the consulting hours. It is no good registering with a practice if the only hours that they consult are hours that you work! Are consultations made on an appointments only basis or do they have open clinics where you just turn up and wait for a vet to see you? Do they do consultations on Saturdays and maybe even Sundays? Ask the cost of a consultation for a rabbit. (There are marked variations in the cost of a consultation and it isn't always the case that the more expensive the better the practice, although equally, a significantly lower consultation fee may indicate that the practice does not attach as much importance to rabbits as it does to cats and dogs).

Hospital status

Only those practices that are hospitals are required to have someone on site 24 hours a day. If the practice doesn't have hospital status then ask whether if your rabbit was ever an inpatient how often they would be checked during the hours that the practice is shut (nighttime, weekends and Bank Holidays).

Certainly if your rabbit was critically ill then an answer of anything but constantly should be enough to put you off selecting the practice, but some practices will employ a service whereby inpatients are taken to another veterinary practice during the hours



Does the practice routinely carry out surgical procedures on rabbits with high success rates?

they are shut, especially if another practice does their out of hours emergency work, with the animal going back to their original practice the next day.

Other practices will have staff coming in at regular intervals to check on inpatients and administer medications etc. It may be that your practice does not routinely have staff present 24/7, but tailors its inpatient care to the individual case, and will arrange for the appropriate level of care to be provided, up to round the clock intensive nursing, depending on need. Don't forget that such care is labour intensive, and you can expect to pay a premium for this level of care, if required.

Friendly and knowledgeable staff

It is fair to say that staff in a veterinary practice are usually very busy, but when selecting a practice you should ensure that all staff are friendly. Staff should be willing and able to answer your questions or, if not, be able to find out the answer or point you in the direction of someone who will know.

Anaesthesia and surgery

Rabbit anaesthesia for routine procedures such as castrations and spays should no longer be seen as high risk, and practices should recommend neutering for both bucks and does and be willing to discuss this with you.

Ask if rabbits are endotracheal (ET) tubed during surgical procedures. It is preferable to have an ET tube in situ during surgery, so if the rabbit should stop breathing during an anaesthetic it can be given Intermediate Positive Pressure Ventilation (IPPV) straight away to provide oxygen. If no ET tube is inserted then the vet would need to try and place one, which is much harder during an emergency and could waste valuable time. Your vet may decide on an individual basis whether or not to intubate, but familiarity with the techniques involved is a good indicator of rabbit competence generally.

The actual anaesthetic drugs used aren't so important as long as the staff administering them and monitoring the rabbit during their anaesthetic are confident and experienced with rabbits. Will your pet's anaesthetic be monitored by a qualified veterinary nurse?

Vaccinations

Your rabbit is going to need a six-monthly myxomatosis booster and annual booster for Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. Does the veterinary practice recommend these and charge a reasonable price for them (anywhere from £10 - £25 per injection



Does the veterinary practice have a good display of rabbit literature?

depending upon the area where you live)? Some practice also offer a 'package' discount whereby you buy the vaccinations as a package for the year or you may get a discount if you have a specific number of rabbits vaccinated at the same time.

These vaccinations shouldn't be given at the same time, so does the practice leave a minimum of two weeks between a myxomatosis and VHD vaccination?

Pet insurance

Does the practice recommend taking out insurance for your rabbit? Insuring rabbits may not be as commonplace as insuring dogs and cats but if you have ever had to pay a large veterinary bill then you will have wished you'd had insurance. Rabbits can and do run up very large veterinary bills, a lot of which could be covered by pet insurance.

Premiums tend to vary on your postcode and the type of policy you opt for (lifelong policies will be more expensive, whereas those which set a limit as to the time or amount you can claim per condition will work out cheaper).

There should be leaflets available for you to take away and read over and always read the small print. It is vital to check what conditions are covered by a policy, as some may place exclusions on dental disease or uterine tumours, and any pre-existing disease is unlikely to be covered.

Second opinions and specialists

Most general practitioner veterinary surgeons do not have further qualifications relating to rabbits, but if they are unable

to take a case further, do they have access and use veterinary surgeons with further qualifications in rabbit medicine, or in various specific fields? This may include specialists in areas such as orthopaedics (bones), soft tissue, dermatology (skin), ophthalmology (eyes) etc.

Additional services

Some practices may offer 'payment plans' whereby if you are faced with a large bill you can pay off a set amount per month until the full bill is settled.

Does the practice sell rabbit food (or are they able and willing to order this in for you)?

Some practices encourage good rabbit ownership by hosting educational evenings or client rabbit checks, whereby diet, housing, neutering, vaccinations, flystrike etc are all discussed and information leaflets given out? Do they carry Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund leaflets, and "Rabbiting On"?

Whilst none of these should influence your choice of veterinary practice, any added benefits are always worth having, and indicate a general level of interest in rabbits at the practice.

As you can see there are numerous points to consider when selecting a veterinary practice for your rabbit.

You are unlikely to ever find the 'perfect' veterinary practice who meets all of the above points, but you should aim to find a practice that meets most of them and whom you are happy entrusting your rabbit's veterinary care to.