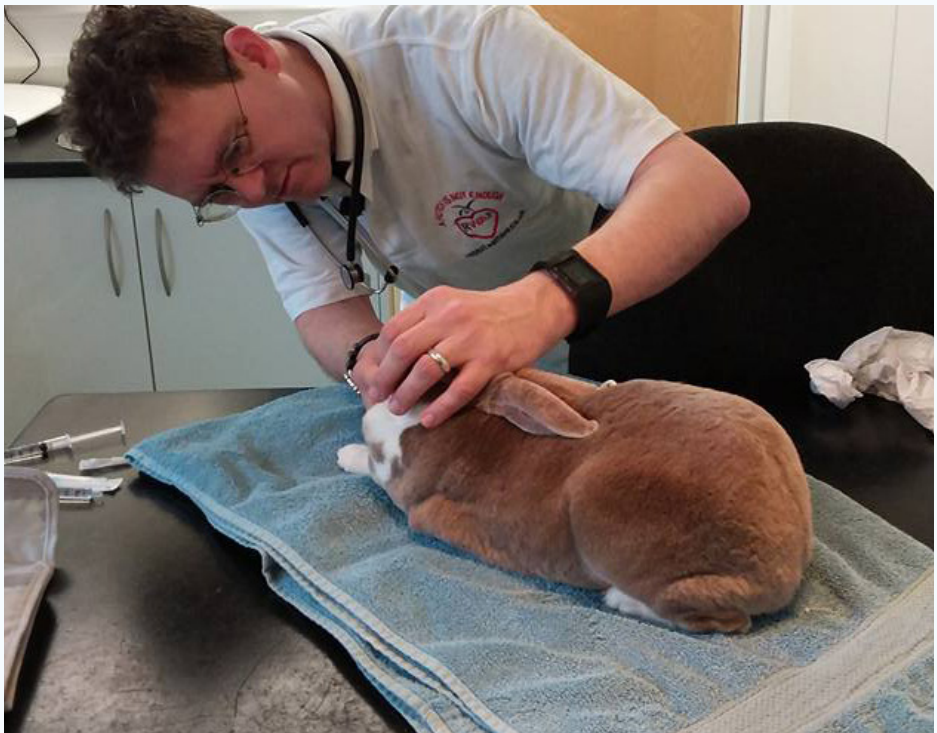
Vets Newsletter
Autumn 2022

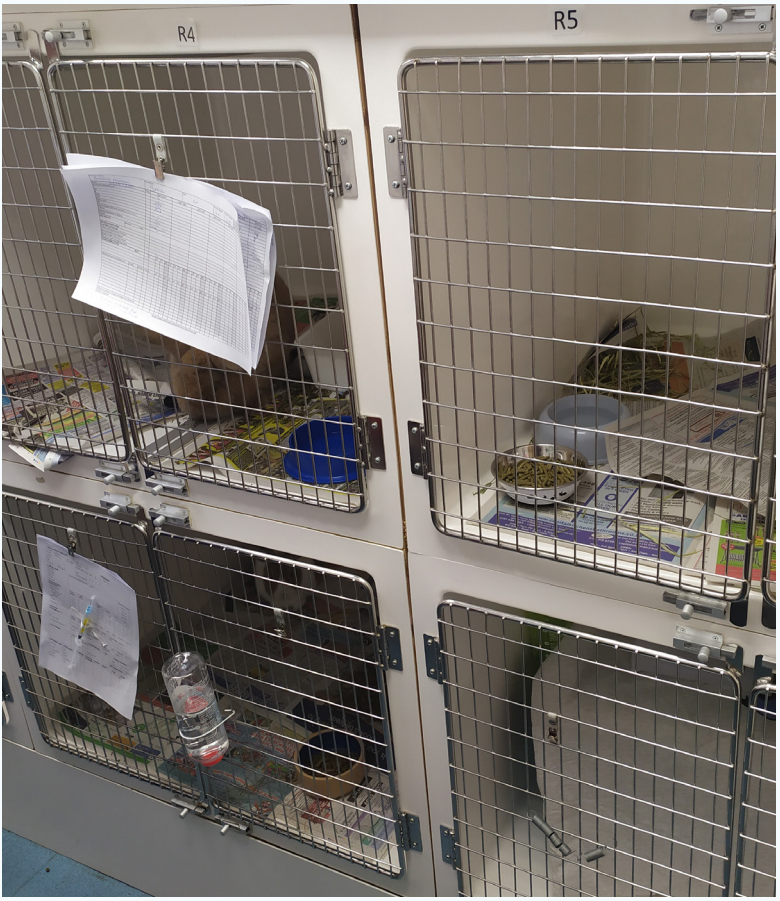
Rabbit Friendly Practice:
Part 2a (Kennels)

This is the second in the series, in which we look at the options for making your practice more rabbit (and, hopefully, other similar species) friendly.

In this one, we cover the kennels (for want of a better word for rabbit accommodation, I will stick with kennels for them). For starters, the ideal is to have a completely separate ward for prey species, and part A here will be about that. Part B will, as well as talking about what goes INSIDE the cage, discuss how to make a shared ward as good as possible, if that is the only option available.

Let's start with the entrance to the kennel ward. There should be an actual door present, to separate the prey species in that accommodation, from the predator and other species outside. The door should be as sound deadening as possible in order to prevent the sound of eg barking dogs, carrying through, and should be kept closed at all times that it doesn't need to be opened and closed. This may require additional ventilation and/or cooling in the ward if that otherwise depends on leaving doors open for good airflow and cool air to get in. It shouldn't just be closed IF noisy animals are present, as its other job is to prevent predator smells entering, and that is something we, with our human noses, are nowhere near as good as rabbits at detecting.





Doors should have a viewing window (which might itself be coverable with a blind) to observe behaviour unseen. This is handy as prey species will hide pain behaviours, and will attempt to look as bright and alert as possible when we look at them, but will relax and allow better assessment when apparently unwatched. In addition, it allows staff to check that no animals are loose, or that no loose animals are in a dangerous position, before the door is opened. The bottom of the door, in any case, should be close enough to the floor to prevent small feet to get wedged under it as it opens, and the hinge side should be covered to stop extremities being squashed.

Another hazard to be aware of in the ward are the fronts of the cages themselves. If rabbits are given the floor space in front of the kennels to exercise and stretch, they may jump and binky, and if they kick their legs out behind or to the side, they can put their feet through the cage fronts, wedging them there as they fall with their whole bodyweight, typically fracturing the tibia.

Ensure nothing dangerous is within reach to such free roaming rabbits. If they can open cupboard doors they may get to food, and overeat concentrates, especially those designed for other animals. Make sure there are no electrical wires within nibbling range, as these can easily be stripped down to the metal, resulting in electrocution.

It is handy to have all required equipment etc safe and close to hand in the room, to avoid having to leave the rabbit to get it, or to delay examination and treatments. Ideally, there should be "rabbit-only" items of equipment that come into close contact with animals, such as scales, to avoid using items that smell of predators. Even after cleaning, this smell will remain and cause noticeable alertness and excitement, even fear, in prey species.

At least some of the cages should be large enough for a pair or even a trio/quad of the largest size of rabbit, whilst most should allow for a pair of average rabbits. Large sized cages which can be subdivided can be helpful, and also useful if the divider can be mesh, to allow a pair of rabbits to be separated partially: to ensure the patient is eating, drinking, urinating and defaecating ok, but to maintain sight, sound and smell of each other, and therefore their pair bond.

The facility to accommodate companions, without incurring and passing on extra expense (unless they are under treatment as well), should be available to all rabbits.

The construction and contents of the kennels will be covered in part B.

Sound levels should, therefore, be kept low. Don't forget that as well as keeping sounds we can hear low in volume, that many animals can hear in a wider range that we can, and rabbits are no exception. They can hear sounds up to 42,000 Hz whereas we can only hear up to 23,000 Hz.

Likewise, with light. We need to consider the intensity, spectrum and photoperiod. Crepuscular though rabbits are in the wild, they adjust to a semi-diurnal nature around people who are active in the daytime, so that isn't a huge problem, although it is a good idea to further dim the lights and give patients a rest at night. For a short period of time, spectrum is not significant: whilst ideally we should give rabbits exposure to UVA and UVB, even the behavioural benefits of UV light are not likely to be missed in a few days. Intensity is important though: rabbits should either be allowed moderate light intensities, or hides, or both. This is more important to some rodent species.

Humidity should be kept at levels at which humans are comfortable. Air conditioning, to reduce humidity as well as control temperature, becomes vital at high temperature/humidity combinations, when rabbits, and even more so, chinchillas, will struggle to keep cool, and may start to mouth breathe, which is a serious welfare concern, and often proceeds death.

The temperature should ideally be around the 16-23 C range, at least prior to GA/sedation. In recovery, higher temperatures are required until the rabbit can generate body heat and maintain normothermia, but that shouldn't be achieved by heating the whole ward. Rabbits should be kept warm elsewhere before returning them to the ward, and local heat sources such as microwaveable heat pads, or electric heat mats with very securely shielded electrical cables, employed.

The next newsletter, part B, will discuss the construction and contents of kennels, and what to do to mitigate stress if it is unavoidable that rabbits and other prey species are kept with predator species such as cats and dogs, or even ferrets!

Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund