

### **Rabbit Behaviour, Health and Care**

ME Buseth and RA Saunders (2015). Published by CABI, Wallingford, Oxon OX10 8DE, UK. 232 pages Paperback (ISBN 978-1-78064-190-4). Price £19.95.

Rabbits are the third most popular mammalian pet in the UK. However, the amount of teaching for veterinary undergraduates in this area for many of the UK veterinary schools does not reflect this. Equally, the profession has some way to go in recognising the importance of suitable and appropriate veterinary care of these animals. The inclusion of rabbit continuing professional development (CPD) within small animal CPD categories, rather than just under 'exotic' categories is a relatively recent advance. Sadly, as a species, they are still excluded from certain discipline-specific post-graduate qualifications. As such, publication of any new texts for this species is greeted positively by those working with them regularly, particularly if the texts are of high quality.

I get the impression that the text is aimed at the keen owner, but that is not to say that a large number of veterinary professionals would not benefit from reading this text. The text covers a broad spectrum of subject areas and is illustrated throughout by multiple full colour images of rabbits at rest or play. There are numerous anecdotal stories throughout each chapter, in separate boxed areas, that help to illustrate what can be achieved with these patients, particularly regarding the improvements that can be achieved in the general welfare of this species if they receive the appropriate care and attention. Both these aspects are seen as positive, based upon client feedback I have received.

There is repetition of a number of points from chapter-to-chapter, but also at times within a chapter. These points, whilst often highly important, eg rabbits are a prey species that frequently do not demonstrate overt signs of disease, do need to be stressed to ensure readers are well aware of them, but when reading the text from cover-to-cover is a little excessive. I imagine that the book is aimed at small portions being read, from time-to-time, and thus this repetition is used to emphasise such aspects.

The book is co-written by a Norwegian author and thus some of the peculiar sentence structure I assume is due to translation or typographical errors. However, there are some important factual errors (eg dental formula) and inconsistencies with radiographic image orientation which whilst being unimportant/insignificant to the owner do not help the book's claim that it is 'an essential' guide as far as veterinary professionals are concerned. It would be a shame if veterinary professionals were put off from reading this text due to these aspects.

Chapter titles are: 'The origin and development of rabbits'; 'The rabbit as a companion animal'; 'Behaviour, learning and communication'; 'Social rabbits'; 'From snout to tail'; 'Rabbit nutrition'; 'Neutering'; 'Cleanliness and hygiene'; 'Rabbit housing and conditions'; 'House rabbits and rabbit-proofing of the home'; 'Life outdoors'; and 'Reproduction and breeding control'. The chapters on general welfare, ie

social interactions, behaviour etc are interspersed by chapters that concentrate on more clinical aspects, eg nutritional needs, neutering and clinical conditions, achieving a good balance overall.

I was pleased to see the importance given to owners' selection of their healthcare provider *in advance* of problems. Sensible advice is given regarding issues that most people only consider at the stressful time when a problem has already arisen. Promoting the need to consider a practitioner's competence/experience in dealing with the species was refreshing, and again is often overlooked. This aspect alone can have a significant impact upon animal welfare as I, sadly, still get numerous comments from clients that previous veterinarians have shown no interest in their pet, or only given limited options where treatment was concerned.

However, there are a number of areas of concern relating to some clinical aspects. These areas may not be significant where the owner is concerned, but have implications if inexperienced veterinary professionals follow the advice given.

In Chapter 6 gastrointestinal stasis is addressed and advised fluid rates for 'severe cases' only recommends fluid rates for maintenance. This should help prevent the condition worsening but will have no impact on redressing dehydration/fluid losses and is all the more surprising when the paragraph refers the reader to page 96 (Chapter 5) where the importance of fluid therapy in stabilising the ill rabbit is appropriately stressed.

Advice given for nutritional support is generally good, advising the use of proprietary products and the avoidance of baby foods, but there should be a caveat associated with the advice to use mashed pelleted feeds as this can potentially increase problems by worsening carbohydrate overload.

My main area of concern relates to the contradictory information relating to tonic immobility. Chapter 5 has an image of oral examination that appears to be being performed via tonic immobility. At the end of the same chapter the author states that tonic immobility is a condition brought upon by fear and stress, but continues to state that tonic immobility should only be used "in appropriate situations, such as when cutting nails". Whilst I acknowledge this reflects the comments of the original paper (which is listed in the notes section at the end of the chapter) I would contend that using such a 'management tool', where an animal is so stressed/fearful to the point that it becomes limp to enable clipping of nails/oral examination, or indeed any procedure, should be considered unacceptable on welfare and/or ethical grounds and would not be tolerated if such fear levels were induced in other domesticated species. The fact that there is little outward sign of the distress caused does not mean the procedure should occur, nor that it is acceptable. The topic warrants further comment to avoid well-meaning owners, upon reading this part of the book, practicing the procedure at home, or encouraging inexperienced veterinary professionals to do similarly. It is note-

worthy that this otherwise well-referenced book fails to list tonic immobility within the index.

I would not wish the above paragraph to put potential readers off this book, as although the topic is important it is covered in only a few short paragraphs, and the comments are at odds with the otherwise strongly welfare-based viewpoint of this book. Indeed, the advice given that “incisors should never be clipped or trimmed with nail clippers” is covered in a not significantly dissimilar word count to that of tonic immobility but, if (quite rightly) followed by veterinary professionals, would result in a significant decrease in pain and discomfort caused by this outdated procedure.

The book gives lots of useful information relating to the importance of appropriate nutrition, ability to exercise, the social and mental well-being aspects of suitable companionship and the benefits that come from the freedom to demonstrate natural behaviours. There is a wealth of advice on how to provide suitable space and factors to

consider for both indoor and outdoor rabbits that, again if followed, will improve rabbit welfare considerably. Indeed, if this advice could be enforced at point of sale the (sadly) too long promoted (but necessary) mantra of “a hutch is not enough” could be consigned to history. This situation that would delight the authors, the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAFF) and their supporters and other pro-rabbit professionals equally.

Overall, I commend this book for promoting the importance of understanding animal behaviour and requirements in order to provide good husbandry and animal welfare. The way it is presented is attractive to the lay reader, but unfortunately due to the repetitiveness and, in some areas, a lack of detail in clinical areas, I suspect it will fall short of the expectations of veterinary professionals, even though there is a great deal to be gained from it.

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