Rabbit Clinics

Abstract
This lecture focuses on the running of rabbit clinics by Vet Nurses in practice, and goes through everything needed to be discussed with the client during the clinic. Subjects such as vaccinations, neutering, feeding, housing and common illnesses are discussed, as well as the practical side of setting up of clinics, educating owners, and the clinical examination within the clinic. Weight clinics are also discussed as well as the ‘Bunny check’ and the lecture shows how important both such clinics can be in ensuring a better standard of health and welfare for pet rabbits.

Learning outcomes
- Understanding of the difference that can be made to rabbit health and welfare by running rabbit clinics
- Knowledge of the subjects needed to be discussed with owners at the rabbit clinics
- Confidence in successfully running rabbit clinics and making a real difference to the lives of pet rabbits.

Course Notes

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Rabbits are the third mostly commonly kept domestic pets in the UK and whilst puppy parties and junior/six month health checks for dogs and cats are commonly run at veterinary practices, few veterinary surgeries are offering this service to their rabbit clients.

Benefits to the owner and rabbit
Few owners, especially new rabbit owners, are aware that the single most common problem vets see with rabbits is related to their diet. If owners can get this right then they will go along way to ensure that their rabbit lives a happy and long life, since diet plays a major role in the dental and gastrointestinal health of rabbits.

Benefits to the veterinary practice
Owners who have received good advice are more likely to return to the practice for routine treatments, such as vaccinations, neutering, flystrike control and to purchase food. Whilst some owners still see rabbits as ‘cheap children’s pets’ there is an ever-increasing amount of owners who see them as equals to cats and dogs and as such are willing to pay for the same standards of veterinary care; be this with insurance or out of their own pockets.

Offering your clients rabbit clinics is an ideal way to get your message across and help to prevent many of the common rabbit ailments related to poor diet and lack of knowledge.
**Setting up rabbit clinics**

Begin by putting up a large display in your waiting room. Companies which supply rabbit food and products designed for rabbits are often able to offer posters and leaflets on their products, and the Rabbit Welfare Fund has a range of very useful leaflets on a variety of rabbit topics, which can be given out to clients who you see, placed in your waiting room or used on a display.

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<tr>
<th>Your display should state:</th>
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<tr>
<td>□ who the appointment will be with (vet or nurse)</td>
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<td>□ times and days when they take place</td>
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<td>□ what topics will be discussed</td>
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<td>□ if literature will be given out</td>
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<td>□ what the health check on the rabbit will include</td>
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<td>□ if a charge is being made for the consultation and if so how much</td>
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<td>□ how clients can book an appointment.</td>
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Make the display as eye-catching as possible and use lots of rabbit images to draw client’s attention to it.

You could also arrange for a mail-shot to all your rabbit clients. To reach potential clients who don’t use your practice, you could advertise the service by contacting your local newspaper/radio station, or putting signs up in local pet shops.

**The bunny consultation**

A bunny consultation could be offered by a Veterinary Surgeon or by a registered or listed Veterinary Nurse. This will be decided by the Practice Principal or Manager. I would suggest allowing a 20 minute appointment for one rabbit or half an hour if the client is bringing two rabbits as there is far too much information to get through in just a 10 minute consultation.

You should aim to cover a variety of rabbit related health and welfare topics during the consultation, as well as health checking the rabbit and sexing it correctly. You would be surprised how many owners have owned their rabbit for several years and still have the sex incorrect.

I always ensure that I check the following during the consultation:

- Eyes and ears for any discharge, and ask the owner if the rabbit has been shaking its head a lot
- The incisor and molar teeth and look at the chin and inside of the forelegs to see if they have been dribbling
- Ascultate the abdomen to ensure that gut sounds are present and feel the abdomen to make sure there is no bloating
- Listen to the heart and lungs
- Check the claws and clip them if necessary
- Ensure their back end if clean, and clean it if it is dirty
- The hocks for Pododermatitis
- The skin for signs or flaking and/or mites
Discussion and advice on the following aspects should be offered:

- **Vaccinations**
  It should be advised that all rabbits, house rabbits included, must be vaccinated annually against Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD/HVD) and every 6 months against Myxomatosis. Owners may tell you that their rabbit had a Myxomatosis or VHD vaccine 3 years ago and believe that they are still protected, so it should be pointed out how long vaccinations last and that boosters are imperative to keep up the protection. The Myxomatosis vaccine can be given from 6 weeks of age, with the VHD vaccine being given from 10 weeks. It is recommended that the Myxomatosis and VHD vaccines be given at least 2 weeks apart. The Rabbit Welfare Fund has a very good leaflet on Myxomatosis and VHD and explains about vaccination.

- **Diet**
  Grass, grass and more grass! Advise owners on the need for a high-fibre diet and that good-quality hay/grass and water must be available at all times. Many owners still feed poor quality muesli type foods and allow their rabbits to selectively feed. These owners should be advised on the potential dental and digestive problems that select feeding can lead to, and told about the benefits of feeding a good quality extruded nugget type food. If selective feeding is already a problem, then offering them a free sample of an extruded nugget type food (Suparabbit Excel, Supreme Selective or Vetpet rabbit) is helpful. Make sure you tell owners that if they are changing the rabbits food, then to do it slowly over 2-3 weeks. Owners often overfeed dry food to their rabbits. It should be emphasised to owners that the commercial rabbit food should be fed in small amounts with the bulk of the rabbit’s diet being made up of ad-lib hay, and then a daily portion of fresh vegetables (greens, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower etc). Chocolate and other human foods must not be offered and pet shop bought treats which are laden with sugar and honey should be avoided, even if they state they are suitable for rabbits.

- **Exercise and housing**
  Rabbits should not spend their entire life shut up in a hutch. Hutches should be looked upon as a resting place only. Rabbits should have the opportunity to exercise for several hours a day, be this in a secure run, designated rooms of the house or an escape proof and safe garden. If owners opt to allow their rabbit free range access in their garden then they must make sure that there are no poisonous plants, recently applied pesticides, escape routes and that predators, such as foxes cannot get into the area. If access is to be allowed in the house then all electricity cables must be moved out of the rabbits reach or made safe by covering them up. Again no poisonous plants should be in reach and warn owners to take care with where they stand or when they shut a door.

- **Neutering and keeping rabbits in pairs**
  Owners are often under the impression that unless they have one rabbit of each sex then neutering isn’t necessary. Whilst this may be true from the point of breeding, the other benefits of neutering should be discussed. This includes the benefits of eliminating the risk of reproductive neoplasia of female rabbits (effecting up to 80% of un-spayed does by the age of 5 years), cessation of pseudo pregnancies in does, cessation of spraying (especially in males), reducing aggressive tendencies especially in female rabbits, and lessening/cessation of amouras behaviour in both sexes.
All practices will have a policy on what ages they will neuter rabbits, but generally speaking bucks can be neutered from 3-4 months of age and does from 4-5 months of age, depending upon the breed.
The best combination for a rabbit pairing is one male and a female with both rabbits being neutered. Same sex combinations can work if both animals are neutered but will have a higher failure rate, and owners should be told never to separate a bonded pair, even for a short time such as a vet visit, as this can lead to a permanent and irreversible fall out between the two rabbits. When visiting the vet etc, owners should be advised to take both rabbits with them.
Never advise guinea pigs as suitable companions for rabbits.

• **Flystrike**
Clients should always be warned about the risk of fly strike (Myiasis) and be advised to check their rabbits for this vigilantly in the milder months (April-September). Rabbits should be checked two or three times a day to ensure that there are no fly eggs of maggots present around their anus or rump.
If the owner notices any maggots then they must be told to telephone the veterinary practice, day or night as this is an emergency situation. Rearguard (Cyromazine), POM-V, can be recommended as a preventative measure for use on rabbits that frequently have a dirty back end. Rearguard contains Cyromazine which is an insect growth inhibitor licensed for prevention of fly strike in rabbits. It does not repel flies but prevents the moult from L1 to L2.

• **Pet Insurance**
Pet insurance should be recommended for all rabbits - often quoting bills for common problems can encourage owners to take out insurance for their rabbit.

Offering the client a ‘goody bag’ with which can include information leaflets which back up the subjects that have been covered during the consultation, a food sample and information on the practice, ensures that the client can read up on the advice you have given, as they are unlikely to have remembered it all.

I find the clients I see with their rabbits are very grateful for the advice they are given and I know that they have gone away with the correct information on how to look after their rabbit properly, and will hopefully avoid many of the common problems that befall rabbits through incorrect care and lack of knowledge.

**References:**