

Animal ER – Ready When You Need Them!

From the worried looks in the waiting room to the sighs of relief in the recovery ward, this hospital was no different from any other hospital preparing for another long night. Surgical packs were ready, nurses were soothing frantic patients, and doctors were doing their best to save lives. The only difference...this is the Animal ER!

An unexpected illness of her pet was the farthest thing from Heather's mind when she woke up that morning. Cooper, her 2 year old Great Dane, was acting a bit sluggish and wasn't interested in his food. When she arrived home that night, she found Cooper in his kennel, depressed, painful abdomen and sort of choking. Luckily, Heather knew a place where her pet could get immediate medical attention at any time.

Emergency care for pets has certainly evolved over the last several decades. Baby boomers might remember when local veterinarians shared emergency duty, taking calls through all hours of the night and early morning. More recently, dedicated emergency clinics were opened and pet owners had access to these during nights and weekends when the regular veterinarians were closed. The most recent rendition of the emergency hospital for pets though, is actually very difficult to distinguish from its human counterpart.

Emergency centers and 24-hour critical care hospitals are becoming much more common. Staffed by devoted emergency veterinarians and team members, these after-hours hospitals are a blessing to people and pets. From the high tech medical equipment in the back to the various amenities in the waiting room, animal emergency facilities provide a similar level of care and compassion that you might see in a human emergency room.

Dr. Elisa Mazzaferro, Director of Emergency Services for Wheat Ridge Veterinary Specialties in Colorado says that "We have gone from patchwork type of medical care to state-of-the art emergency critical care, providing many services at all hours of the day and night"

Heather's visit started when the triage nurse came into the exam room and noted Cooper's distended abdomen. Extensive training and years of education alerted the technician that this could be a high priority emergency – bloat! Quickly obtaining a history from Heather and vital signs from Cooper, the technician left the room to get the doctor. In no time the doctor was in the room paying most attention to Cooper. Heather knew that Cooper might be suffering from "bloat", a serious, often fatal, twisting of the spleen around the stomach.

After a very fast discussion of the estimated cost of services, Cooper was whisked away for x-rays. Heather, meanwhile, was escorted to a well-provisioned waiting room complete with coffee, TV, and plenty of reading material. Crystal Rush, veterinary assistant, says she tries to keep clients occupied and calm because “it’s important for the pet’s sake. They can sense our energy and moods and we need to stay calm for them!”

In the x-ray room, the emergency doctor is busy reviewing the digital x-rays of Cooper. Noting a particular shadow on the x-ray, the doctor confirms the twisting of the spleen, causing the life threatening bloat condition.

As she heads back to speak to Heather, devoted veterinary nurses and assistants begin to prepare Cooper for surgery. IV catheters are placed, fluids are started and Cooper is given medications to help relieve his anxiety, support his vital signs, and, importantly, reduce the amount of pain he might experience. When all is prepared, the team just awaits the okay from the owner.

According to Dr. Mazzaferro, the financial aspect of emergency care can be very challenging. “When you go to a human ER, tests are run and the person is treated, no discussion of costs. This is not true for our pets.” But, an increasing number of pet owners say that they would pay almost any price for their best friend and Heather is no exception. Cooper was taken to a sterile surgical suite where a team of surgeons and surgical assistants using the latest high tech equipment quickly corrected Cooper’s twisted spleen.

After surgery, Cooper recovered in a state of the art ICU ward complete with vital signs monitors and veterinary nurses available 24 hours a day. Due to the knowledge, skill, and rapid action of the emergency hospital staff, Cooper was headed for home in about 3 days, from something that could have ended his life.

Emergency care for our pets has come a long way since the late night house calls of veterinarians. Talk with your veterinarian to see how she handles emergencies and what you can do to help in the event of a critical situation with your pet.

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