

NEW ENGLAND WILDLIFE CENTER

Basic Math

The Almost Monthly
NEW ENGLAND WILDLIFE CENTER NEWSLETTER

Preserving New England's Wild Legacy

The Obverse Observer – *A new periodic series that examines some of the difficult issues surrounding the care of wildlife with an invitation to readers to participate in their solution. Please give us your comments by emailing greg@newwildlife.com*

“Basic Math”

I called around to see what it costs to keep a dog or cat in the hospital for a full day and overnight. No matter how intense the care or how little the care, by the time I was done figuring my bill, it was over \$100. That \$100 is an important figure. It is the minimum price that you will pay to have 24-hour domestic animal hospital care. The price can exceed that greatly.

I went back to the New England Wildlife Center record keepers and asked this question: “How many 24-hour care units do we provide to wild animals each year?” In other words, how many wild animals stay in our hospital overnight and for how many nights? The answer was 45,000 times a year.

So here is the basic math part. If we were a commercial domestic animal hospital the charge for these 45,000 – 24-hour care units not including any other care would be $\$100 \times 45,000$ or \$4.5 million.

The expense budget for the whole NEWC organization including the hospital, all the education programs (60,000 student contact hours) and all other costs to run our new facility is \$750,000.

So what's the point? Well, commercial vets charge to care for animals. It is against the law for the non-profit New England Wildlife Center (or for any wildlife rehabber) to charge for the care of sick and injured wildlife.

At the same time, the Center receives no tax money to provide care. We are not part of a large organization or subsidized by a university or any other entity. To make this financial hardship even more difficult, state law requires the Center to provide each wild animal (robin, raccoon, chipmunk, starling) with the same level of care that your pet dog or cat receives.

And, on the other side of the same set of laws, hunters, trappers, and homeowners are given permission to kill (and in many cases almost kill) wildlife. Why is that? Then, strangely, (even

if this is not directly about math) because we have veterinarians on staff at the Center, our animal care technologists are by law restricted from assisting wildlife at a level of care that other non-veterinary facilities can provide.

In part, this is because the laws affecting veterinarians are designed to protect consumers. Wild animals have no consumers attached to them. The laws affecting wildlife are designed to protect some species and to “manage” others.

This dichotomy (frankly this confusion) is unfortunate because it affects the care of wildlife. It diminishes the number of animals that can receive care. And, it ultimately prevents veterinarians and their assistants from doing their job well. It ignores that there are hundreds of animals in Massachusetts that fall injured at the hands of Massachusetts citizens every day.

In the veterinary setting dollars dictate the kinds of diagnostic and therapeutic tools we can purchase and the types of specialties that surround an animal's needs. Does this mean we don't provide adequate care? No, not at all. It does mean that there are some basic philosophical differences and challenges that exist in providing the best care possible for all the wildlife that comes to the Center with the limited resources available.

The staff of the Center is just as thoroughly trained as they are in the commercial practice. We are licensed veterinarians, veterinary technicians, animal caretakers and rehabilitators – but there are fewer of us and many more patients. Nevertheless, the care of each individual wild animal is required to be of the same quality as that of an owned pet. In addition, many of the human hands that help us are students learning biology and giving their all to join the ranks of licensed veterinarians, technicians, biologists and animal caretakers. We are, by and large, in a different kind of business than commercial veterinary practices.

How can you say that? Don't all clinical veterinarians kind of do the same thing? The overall lack of resources in wildlife medicine changes the manner in which we approach medical care but it does not change the quality of the professional caretaker. In addition there are some basic differences in what wild animals need for care.

First, not every animal that comes through our doors needs round-the-clock overnight tending, nor does every animal need veterinary assistance. Nevertheless, the law sees that these animals are in a wildlife hospital, and because they are in a place that is called a wildlife hospital, they need to be overseen by a veterinarian, requiring veterinary charts, veterinary oversight, veterinary attention, and veterinary diagnostics and therapeutics.

Second, the biology and especially the behavioral needs of our patients are quite different from emotionally needy dogs and cats. Wild animals don't generally like to be cuddled. Domestic cats and dogs, by and large, like a fuss. If you fuss over an adult mute swan, raccoon or snapping turtle, you lose. You fuss over a hummingbird, a kingfisher or a great blue heron – they lose, because they die from fright. You can kill a cardinal by simply trying to listen to its heart with a stethoscope.

Our end goals in wildlife medicine are different too. Wild animals want to be wild. At the end of the process they need to be minimally self-sustaining and if they are not, then we will euthanize them. Not so for dogs and cats.

Let's compare what happens in a commercial practice with what happens in our wildlife facility. As an example, let me use one of the veterinary hospitals that I work in regularly (it is across and down the street from us). It is a healthy commercial practice with multiple veterinarians (some diplomates, and some new just out of school interns) and multiple veterinary technicians, receptionists, and billing people. When a hit-by-car dog is brought in, several technicians and several veterinarians look at that dog immediately. One officially appointed veterinarian is in charge, but because of the money, many eyes see it, examine it, and care for it. There are many hands and legs to reach for the syringe, and while one cradles the patient, another places a catheter, another tears tape and gauze, or reaches for the oxygen hose. Caretakers talk through the whole process to one another mostly about what is happening to the patient. (You are paying for the best possible care.) This is a rich, informative interchange – professionals and colleagues sharing observations, opinions, facts and ideas. "I've seen this before and did it this way" . . . or "What is this, the third hit by a car today?" "Can you turn on the oxygen?" "Can you page radiology?" "Maybe we need an ultrasound"

By contrast, what happens at the New England Wildlife Center? While there are just as many hands and legs, voices and eyes if you count all of our staff, interns and volunteers as in a commercial practice, nearly all of them are untrained in veterinary medicine--many are high school and undergraduate students. They are all eager to learn and excited to help. Their assistance helps the patient in the short run and all the animals in the long run because these helpers learn but they also ignite to become animal care professionals by helping us here. (No one is directly paying for their care but there is still a substantial investment.) At NEWC the pitter-patter around the patient is not "I've seen this before and did it this way . . ." but it is just as rich but goes like this . . . "What kind of animal is this?" "Wow, it's so little, what does it weigh? 2 grams?" "Let's put it away for a while – if we continue to handle it, it will die from stress." "Can you give a 2 gram animal a shot?" "Do you know if metronidazole is toxic to wrens?" This is no less caring, no less professional than at the commercial practice, but it is different. There is a large educational component to the interchange; everyone is learning. There are in fact about 400 species of wild animals to know about, not just cats and dogs, so everyone learns, even the lead veterinarian.

We are now faced with an interesting ethical dilemma. What is it that people want for *their* wildlife? The best possible attentive care? Like in a commercial practice? If that is the case, then the New England Wildlife Center can pare down its patient load. To get us to an equivalent value as a typical commercial practice (and remember the math we are doing here is quite conservative) we would have to reduce our patient load from the 45,000 patient overnights to about 3500 patient overnights for an entire year. At that level it equates to caring for about 50 orphaned grey squirrels (about 10 nests) or 70 cottontails (about 10 nests) or perhaps euthanizing all the animals that come to us so that we never exceed 10 patients at a time. This latter scenario would necessitate killing thousands of wild animals that otherwise would go back to the wild. As it is 50% of our patients do go back to the wild. This ranges from 1000 – 2000 wild lives a year. Frankly, this is not a bad

average considering our limited resources and that we treat what's been cast off by the lawn mower of human activity.

So what's the point of bringing up all this math? Well, I had five points that I wanted to make. First, the Center and other rehabilitators are under-resourced. As an organization NEWC survives payroll to payroll. Second, the wildlife problem (i.e. how many wild animals and species are hurt and need care) is huge and greatly unrecognized. Third, the field of wildlife medicine is ill defined and because of a lack of understanding, poorly regulated. Fourth, the care and medicine of wildlife is vastly different from that of cats and dogs. Fifth, a place like New England Wildlife Center deserves to be thought of in a new light – as both an educational and caretaking facility, and not just jammed into an old classification.

So what points do you want to make? Email your comments to greg@newwildlife.com.

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