Safer Horse Rescues
Chaired by Jim Green

14.00–17.30

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Being called out to help rescue a horse stuck in a ditch is possibly every vet’s worst nightmare. It isn’t exactly top of the list for the emergency services either. Despite the inherent dangers, animal rescue has traditionally been seen as a ‘soft’ humanitarian service - a way of helping out - and therefore not viewed as seriously as other incidents fire fighters have to deal with. As a result, fire fighters never received formal training in how to rescue animals, and few, apart from those based in rural communities, were experienced in animal handling.

Around 12 years ago, Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service realised that animal rescues were amongst the most dangerous incidents they dealt with and began developing their expertise in animal rescue, using tried and tested techniques developed over years of working with livestock. They researched and developed specialist equipment, and trained with animal rescue specialists in the USA, including Professor Tomas Gimenez, Clemson University Animal and Veterinary Sciences Department in South Carolina, a member of the National Veterinary Response Team responsible for the care of animals caught up in disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

In 2007, the animal rescue team at Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service were instrumental in the launch of the Emergency Services Protocol (ESP), the horse rescue initiative launched by the equine industry, most notably Horse & Hound magazine, the British Horse Society (BHS) and BEVA, which set out procedures for all those involved in equine rescue. The initiative sought to minimise delays in horses receiving veterinary care, maximise the chances of a positive outcome for the animal, and improve the safety of all those involved in equine rescue.

As well as establishing appropriate procedures for equine rescue, including calling for assistance from a vet from the BEVA Directory of Equine Veterinary Practices, training for the fire and rescue service was crucial. This is now underway in the UK, led by Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service and supported by the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) through the Animal Rescue Practitioners Forum, on which BEVA sits in an advisory capacity.

It became apparent that vets needed specialist training too, and last year the Animal Rescue Specialists at Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service collaborated with BEVA to launch a new training course in Rescue and Emergency Medicine for Equine Vets. The course content includes an overview of how the fire and rescue service operate at emergencies involving large animals; basic manual handling rescue techniques, including a hands-on

simulated bog rescue using straps and inflatable rescue paths; emergency medicine and first aid; and in-field sedation and anaesthesia.

Despite working with horses every day, or perhaps because of this, a surprising number of vets put themselves in danger at rescue scenes. Fire fighters never go near a rescue situation without head protection and neither should anyone else. Stressed horses are unpredictable and often unusually aggressive. Every part of its body is a potentially hazard. The safest place to work on a recumbent horse (although nowhere is totally safe) is on the spine side, away from the kicking zone. Firm control of the head is necessary at all times, as even lying on its side and sedated, a horse can deliver a powerful head butt.

The primary function of the fire and rescue service is to make the scene safe and to formulate a plan for the rescue. This involves the Incident Commander making an assessment of the situation: making sure everyone has an escape route, clearing the area of anything that might hamper the rescue, such as brambles and other debris, checking overhead cables in case a crane needs to be brought in to lift the horse to safety, and discussing sedation options with the vet. All this takes time, but is essential preparation to avoid problems later.

As well as assessing the condition of the animal and administering first aid, the vet’s key function at the scene is to sedate or anaesthetise the horse to make the rescue safer. One of the biggest mistakes a vet will make is in underestimating the dose. The amount of sedative they might use in the relative calm of a stable or hospital is rendered ineffective at a highly-charged rescue scene where the effects of sedatives are reduced by the animal’s instinctive ‘fight or flight’ response. Adrenaline stimulates the nervous system, increasing cardiovascular and respiratory functions, muscular effort and acceleration of reflexes, making stressed horses much more difficult to sedate. Increased potency can be achieved using combinations of drugs and this approach is generally more effective than topping up an initially too small dose. Continuous infusion sedation can be used to great effect in prolonged and difficult rescues.

Animal rescue is not necessarily about the fire and rescue service having highly technical equipment. Only 20% of an effective animal rescue is about the kit, which is deceptively simple. Eighty percent is about planning, control of the incident, understanding animal psychology and behaviour, and how to apply basic rescue techniques.