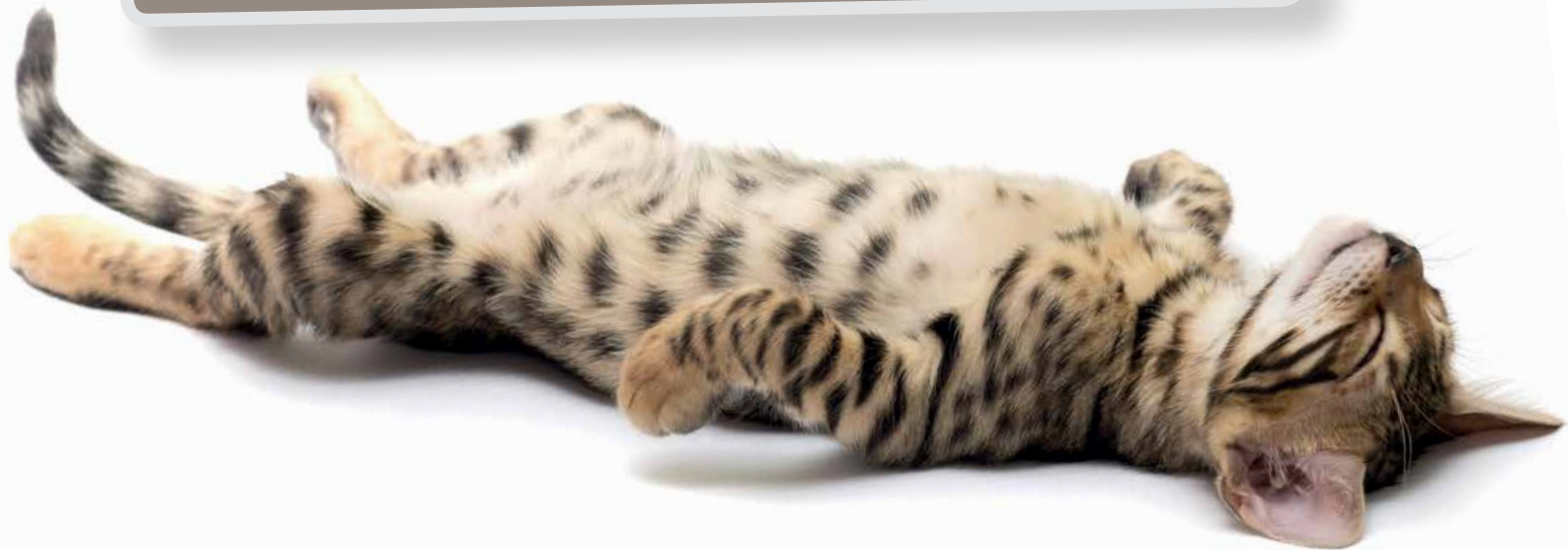


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# KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

Pet anxiety is experienced by veterinarians on a daily, even hourly basis. So, the team of a non-profit animal hospital decided to share their knowledge and experience by holding educational workshops. Chris Canty reports



### AS THE LARGEST NOT-FOR-PROFIT

animal hospital in Australia, Lort Smith Animal Hospital in North Melbourne is also the busiest, where over 40 vets and 70 nurses work together in eight consult rooms, four theatres and 11 wards. Among this hive of activity, groundbreaking programs, such as the Low Anxiety Animal-Handling Workshop, have started to win plaudits and are changing the way animals are treated across the country.

### HELPING ALL

Dr Russell Harrison is the general manager of veterinary services at Lort Smith Animal Hospital. He arrived in 2001 as a vet student doing work placements and immediately knew he wanted to work in a busy environment that was open to everyone.

“I found the case mix very interesting, but was also impressed by how the organisation helped owners who had limited financial means,” says Dr Harrison who completed his veterinary surgery degree at the University of Melbourne in 2001. “When the general manager veterinary services job became available in 2011, I applied. My role is mainly administrative, but I still do occasional clinical work.

“It’s rewarding to read the feedback we get from clients regarding the vet care they receive and, in many cases, would not have had access to if Lort Smith didn’t exist.”

In 2014, an average of 28 emergencies a day were handled, 45 vets performed 37,918 consults, 7675 emergency consults and 6260 surgeries for the year. Seventy nurses cared for an average of 50 patients a day, while the adoption centre helped more than 2000 animals (re-homing; emergency boarding; treating wildlife; keeping pets of the homeless healthy).

“The care we provide is exceptional and that is irrespective of the owners’ circumstances,” says Dr Harrison. “I am continually impressed by our staff who have to deal with complex medical and surgical cases every day and despite cost constraints, get great outcomes for both the animals and owners.”

### LOW STRESS

Understandably a visit to a vet can be stressful for animals, and that often results in bites and scratches to owners and veterinarians. Under the guidance of Dr Gabrielle Carter, a Melbourne vet specialising in the field of animal behaviour, Dr Harrison and staff learnt how to handle animals with the least amount of stress through the Low Anxiety Animal-Handling Workshop.

“We were concerned by the number of animal-related injuries that were occurring—bites and scratches—so we decided to provide additional staff training on animal handling,” says Dr Harrison. “So we have implemented a series of steps to reduce animal stress, which has led to reduced injuries.”

Small steps undertaken at the hospital to mitigate aggression and escapist behaviour have started to show results.

“At reception we have towels that have been sprayed with Feliway which we



Visits to the vet are understandably stressful for animals.

give to cat owners on arrival to place in the cat carrier, while dogs are provided with a piece of fabric sprayed with Adaptil to tie on the collar,” explains Dr Harrison. “This reduces the stress before the animal goes into the consult room.”

And it is not only in the consulting rooms where changes have been felt, as other parts of the hospital have seen the benefits





**Dr Russell Harrison,**  
Lort Smith Animal  
Hospital.

of the workshops. “Surprisingly, one of the participants who found the anxiety reduction techniques most useful was a surgeon who spends most of his time with unconscious animals,” he says.

“He found the calming technique worked particularly well on cats. If any animal is stressed, its response to sedation and anaesthetic will be less predictable. The symptoms of stress might interfere with other clinical symptoms we are monitoring, so it’s vital we keep the animal as relaxed as possible.”

### THREE CORE PRINCIPLES

According to Dr Gabrielle Carter, there are three core principles that other veterinary practices can use, and these can just as easily be practised by owners at home ...

#### 1. Communicate effectively

“You need to be aware of your body language and what it is telling the animal,”

“You need to be aware of your body language and what it is telling the animal.”

**Dr Gabrielle Carter, Melbourne animal behaviourist**

she says. “Most animals are much more attuned to non-verbal communication than humans are, so we need to make sure we are communicating a sense of calm and confidence.

“We also need to be mindful of what the animal is trying to tell us. Look for the signs they are giving and respond to them, so that they learn you are trustworthy.”

#### 2. Give the animal a sense of control

“Use minimal restraint to avoid making the animal feel powerless. Often the restraint is actually the trigger for aggression or stress. For example, if an animal shows fear during clipping, then give them a break and let them relax for a minute. Try to guide them so they know what you want them to do, rather than forcing them to comply. For example, instead of physically removing a resisting cat from its carrier, give it the time to come out by itself.”

#### 3. Be predictable

“Uncertainty is one of the most common triggers of stress in both humans and animals. Apart from the obvious things like speaking to the animal first, or perhaps just giving it a gentle stroke before you pick up its paw, try to give it an indication of what you want so it can comply rather than be forced; so it is a more active participant. For example, if you need the animal to lie down for examination, guide it and let it know what you want it to do, rather than just flipping it on its back.”

### LEARN MORE

Lort Smith Animal Hospital supplies a fact sheet to help people deliver their pets in the most relaxed state possible.

Dr Harrison also recommends DVDs and books from the late internationally acclaimed veterinarian/animal behaviourist, Dr Sophia Yin.

The veterinary hospital also runs seminars regularly on topics of interest to the veterinary industry. For more information, go to [www.lortsmith.com](http://www.lortsmith.com). ➤