

## CARE OF THE HOSPITALISED REPTILE IN PRIVATE PRACTICE

KAREN HOMER RVN  
NEIL A FORBES BVETMED RFP DIPECAMS FRCVS  
Great Western Exotic Vets  
Unit 10 Berkshire House, County Park,  
Shrivenham Road, Swindon, SN1 2NR  
[www.gwexotics.com](http://www.gwexotics.com)

The aim of hospitalising any patient is to provide an optimal diagnostic and therapeutic environment where the chances of a positive clinical outcome are maximised. This can only be achieved if the fundamental needs of the patient can be provided.

The needs of a hospitalised cat or dog are easily provided for with a typical kennel, blanket, commercial diet and water. Reptile hospitalisation should fulfil the same basic need for adequate nutrition, and a comfortable, and safe environment, however the needs of the reptile are specific to the species. The hospitalisation facility must be hygienically managed, of appropriate length, depth and height, which is maintained with appropriate heat, humidity, lighting and substrate to meet needs of the species.

Most practices are inadequately equipped for reptile hospitalisation.

When setting up the hospitalisation vivarium check the requirements for the individual species, it is important not to assume that the conditions provided by the owner were suitable let alone optimal. It is reported that up to 75% of exotic animals presented as sick patients to veterinarians are suffering from a husbandry or management related disorders. It would therefore be negligent for you to continue these conditions when hospitalising the individual.

Hospitalisation facilities should fulfil the basic husbandry and psychological needs of the patient, whilst being hygienic and secure, and allowing patient observation and care.

### BASIC REQUIREMENTS

The first starting point is to know what exact species you are treating. Remember it's not just a lizard or a tortoise; species of these genera come from a wide range of geographical areas and environments, resulting in totally different requirements.

The following factors will need to be considered and provided for:

- **Temperature and humidity.** Thermometers and hygrometers should be available to monitor the conditions.
- **Light.** Correct diurnal pattern and full spectrum requirements should be considered.
- **Nutrition** must be appropriate to the species, with a method of administration in an anorexic patient.

- **Fluids.** Consideration must be made to how the species obtains water, and how you would administer fluid to a dehydrated patient.

## **OTHER REQUIREMENTS**

**Psychological wellbeing** of any patient must be considered. Providing nutrition and correct temperature/lighting etc is only part of the picture: stress must be kept to a minimum. Where possible the animals' natural behaviours must be considered and catered for, this may include basking, climbing, burrowing, or submerging in water. However, the reasons for hospitalisation may dictate what cage furniture can be offered to mimic natural behaviours. If the animal requires close observation, allowing it to hide will cause difficulties. It may not be appropriate to offer high branches to an arboreal species if its physiological state may increase the risk of falling or injury.

### **Hygiene**

Cage substrate, must be appropriate to the species, but be maintained hygienically without causing contamination of wounds. For most hospitalised reptiles, shredded newspaper is adequate for short term hospitalisation. Any cage furniture needs to be easily cleaned and disinfected or disposable. Nurses must be aware of zoonotic risks associated with handling reptiles (eg Salmonellosis), good personal hygiene, intra patient hygiene and hygiene of hospitalisation facilities is mandatory.

### **Secure**

It is essential to ensure that the patient cannot escape from the hospitalisation accommodation, but the accommodation must enable the patient to feel secure and safe from predators. Positioning of hospital facilities for reptiles within the practice needs to be thought about carefully. Reptiles are extremely sensitive to olfactory stimulus, it is not enough for the area to be free from the noise of other patients, it needs to be free from their odours too. Staff should be conscious of this when dealing with multiple hospital patients.

**Monitoring** – careful regular observation and recording of data by the nurse will be required, including weight, fluid intake, urine and faecal output and consistency, appetite, level of activity, nature of respiration and demeanour. Hospitalisation charts designed as a table to allow this data to be added, as well as the temperature and humidity levels in the environment will ensure a more thorough observation.

The set up of the facility is only part of hospitalising a patient. Consideration has to be made to the purpose of hospitalising the patient; is it for post operative care, observation, sample collection, or medication.

**Remember: The hospitalisation of any species should improve the health of the individual, if the facilities and care available are inadequate for the species being treated, the health and welfare of that animal is compromised.**