Surviving weather extremes: considerations for practices

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Extremes in weather, such as flooding, high winds, heat waves, deep snow and ice, can present different problems for vets having to work in such conditions, and practice managers have a duty to ensure a safe environment for their staff and clients. Iain Richards discusses some extreme weather scenarios and the hazards associated with them, and the importance of being prepared.

AT the time of writing, the southern Lake District has seen glorious days with clear skies and temperatures exceeding 20°C, followed by sub-zero temperatures and blizzards. While these changes are extreme, they are neither surprising nor unusual. Our latitude (50° to 61° north) is comparable with Edmonton and Moscow, yet we do not experience the same lengthy, cold winters or warm summers because our weather pattern is dominated by moist air coming in from the Atlantic. Combined with the effect of the Gulf Stream, our predominant weather system is moderate temperature and moderate rainfall. However, this is of little comfort when faced with a foot of snow overnight, so this article aims to highlight some of the weather extremes your practice may face and how best to prepare for them.

Cold

St Agnes Eve – Ah, bitter chill it was!
Snow and ice are perhaps our most challenging weather. Walking, let alone driving, becomes far more hazardous and there are few other conditions that can affect footfall and income as hard as snow.

Preparation
Summer is potentially the time to buy proper snow shovels. They are inexpensive and far more efficient than spades. However, they are only suitable for new snow. Once the snow is packed, they are too flimsy to break through the compacted layers. Hence, both snow shovels and spades need to be kept in preparation for the winter. Salt or grit is another commodity worth storing in readiness.

Clearing snow and your liability
There is the perception that if snow is cleared and someone slips on the cleared path the practice is liable; however, this is not true and readers are advised to look at the Health and Safety Executive’s website where fuller details can be read to dispel this urban myth (HSE 2012).

As with all aspects of safety, employers have a duty of care to their employees and to their customers, so snow should be cleared as soon as possible, ideally before anyone drives on to the surface. There is an argument that failing to clear the snow – leading to an impromptu ice rink – is creating a greater risk, so practices should have a clear policy of checking weather forecasts and putting measures into effect in advance. Grit salt works well for melting ice and is best applied before the snow or ice builds up.

Clearing snow is a laborious task, although it is made easier if all practice members help. Also large mugs of coffee or hot chocolate, while standing admiring one's labours, do more for team bonding than many a raft-building session!

Wind

Blow, winds and crack your cheeks!
The greatest risk to the structural integrity of your practice are high winds and there is little excuse for not performing regular and competent maintenance. Loose roof tiles can be particularly dangerous, so the roof should be inspected at intervals. Trees, particularly those closest to the building, should be checked by a tree surgeon, as internal rot is not obvious and weakens trunks quite considerably. In autumn, strong winds may pile leaves in corners, which can be both unsightly and a hazard.
Rain

Raineth on the just and also on the unjust fella, but chiefly on the just, because the unjust hath the just’s umbrella

While rain itself may be unpleasant, it is actually standing water that presents the risks. Whether from the constant rain of autumn and winter, or a sudden flash flood in summer, if the amount of water falling exceeds the capacity of the local drainage system, then flooding problems will occur. This issue should be considered, particularly when planning the building or relocation of a practice. If you already occupy a location and notice that large puddles form repeatedly in certain areas, make sure to check the drainage system blockages.

Many areas now have automatic flood warnings that send out a prerecorded message to key members of staff. Being properly prepared for floods should include the provision of sandbags, mops and floor scrapers.

Wet leaves

If left, leaves rot and become slimy, thus creating a slip hazard. Removing them makes sense and also ensures that drains do not become blocked.

Thunder and lightning

Very, very frightening

Even without a direct strike, electrical storms can play havoc with modern electrical equipment. Surge protectors are inexpensive (certainly in comparison to having to replace a fried computer). Some have a battery that allows time for the computers to be closed down and data saved. If there is a hint of an electrical storm, it is sensible to close down all computers that are not essential. The installation of a lightning conductor should also be considered if the risk is felt to be high.

Lightning strike is the subject of many insurance claims and, as lightning can be very localised, it is helpful to be aware of such storms before performing any postmortem examination. The cows in the photograph below all died due to a lightning strike.

Heat

The clouds were afraid, one-ten in the shade

While extreme heat and sun are perhaps uncommon in the UK, they can present as much discomfort as extremes of cold. This will be familiar to anyone who has had to operate or consult in a poorly ventilated room. Thankfully, air-conditioning has become more common and portable units are relatively inexpensive. Blinds and curtains can help reduce some of the worst effects if air conditioning is not an option.

Maintaining an ambient temperature is a potentially tricky task for managers, as different staff members will vary in their preferences. This can lead to the absurd situation of staff using air conditioning to cool a room in which a previous user turned up the heat. It should be possible to decide on an average temperature to which all rooms can be set; some practices then opt to remove all controls so that settings cannot be changed.

Things to consider

Closing the practice

There may well come a point at which the weather is so extreme that the practice needs to close. A lack of power as outlined below, for example, would be the most common reason to close, but heavy snowfall would also be a factor.

Thought has to be given to any in-patients and this may mean unexpected changes in the rota. Such instances at the mercy of force majeure should be discussed with the staff beforehand. Faced with closure, many practices might also consider keeping on a skeleton crew, just in case clients prove to be of the intrepid variety.

Heat, light and power

Most practices will now be using electricity or gas for heating. However, these supplies can be disrupted, so some thought to alternatives must be given. Emergency generators are now mandatory for veterinary hospitals under the Practice Standards Scheme. Those relying on oil should ensure that the tank is full before the start of winter.

Another important reason to ensure that practices have continued access to a power supply is that providing decent lighting for entrances and car parks is one of the simplest ways to reduce hazards. Slips and trips are far more common when lighting is poor.

Medicines

Medicines have strict storage conditions and, for most of the time, these will be unaffected by changes in external temperature. Ideally, keeping doors shut should allow a stable temperature to be reached; however, the dispensary is one of the most used rooms in the practice and some form of temperature control will have to be used. During summer heat waves, portable air-conditioning units can help should the dispensary temperature rise.

Cars present their own challenges and maximum-minimum thermometers should be used to determine any extremes. Purpose built temperature controlled units are now available for many cars, but practice
staff should be aware that many of these car units are only capable of dealing with relatively small changes compared to the temperature outside, and on very hot days, for instance, may not provide sufficient cooling.

**Entrances**

Providing a porch or other covered area can greatly reduce risks by creating some protection from the elements. For instance, visitors are more likely to shake off excess water or snow if they are in a sheltered area, rather than in the practice itself, decreasing the chance of slips indoors. Matting to remove dirt and moisture is also an excellent aid, but it must be maintained properly. In very wet weather, mats become saturated quickly and need to be changed, and they must not become an additional trip hazard themselves.

**Staff considerations**

For farm and equine practices, work has to carry on even in some serious extremes. I carry in my car extra clothing for winter, as well as sunblock for summer. (From the accompanying author picture, readers will appreciate that he also carries a bewildering array of hats.) Personal protective equipment (PPE) is a requirement for all employees. The extent of this should be agreed during any induction process, but typically includes over-clothing and footwear. Employees may also be able to include some of their own items on their tax returns, in which case the practice accountant should be consulted.

Although there may be guidelines on PPE for staff, these have to be adapted for specific conditions. Full waterproofs may be desirable for biosecurity, but wearing them all day in high temperatures is unreasonable; boiler suits, although less sartorially elegant, are incredibly practical in these situations. The effect of sun should not be underestimated and it makes sense for practices to advise new graduates to use sunblock and sunglasses when working outside in summer.

Extremes of weather can easily sap staff morale and a little thought can be greatly appreciated. Providing hot pies for staff meetings in winter, or ice creams in summer, are welcome distractions.

**Travel to and from work**

It is employees’ responsibility to present themselves for work at their contracted times. Strictly speaking, inability to get to work due to extreme weather is not the employer’s problem and pay can be deducted for unauthorised absence if it is stated in the contract. Most practices are unlikely to be so draconian. However, if an employee wishes to purchase a remote house known for becoming snowbound, it is reasonable for employers to ask whether measures are in place should it be difficult to get to work.

Keep in mind, however, that some conditions, such as sudden high winds, are unforeseeable. I’ve heard of one instance where a fallen tree due to high winds blocked a drive and revealed a hitherto unknown relationship between two practice members when they were both unable to get to work!

**Driving**

Car journeys present problems of their own, and winter driving has been the topic of a previous article in *In Practice* (Richards 2012). There can be no doubt that driving in high winds or when there is heavy surface water or snow and ice is extremely hazardous. The necessity of the journey must be considered by both the practice and the employee before setting out. For example, if high winds are causing branches to fall, then the call may have to be rescheduled for a safer time. This may require careful explanation to an irate client if the weather extreme is very localised, as may occur with flash flooding.

**Patients and clients**

Patients will be subject to the same extremes of temperature as the employees. Convalescing in-patients are susceptible to extremes and those undergoing an anaesthetic need particular care. Most small animal practices now provide water bowls as a routine, although these are probably best placed outside the building to avoid a wet-floor hazard.

Practices can take advantage of changeable weather to alert clients to the potential risk to their animals. Local press, but increasingly, social media sites such as Twitter or Facebook, can be used, as well as text alerts for clients. In addition to the obvious risk of dogs in hot cars, consider other conditions such as sunburn on white cat ears or the flesh marks of horses. The NADIS parasite forecast (www.nadis.org.uk/parasite-forecast.aspx) provides a wealth of information that can help practices guide stock-owners towards the best treatment and the best timing of that treatment.

**Proper preparation prevents poor performance**

The one aspect of British weather that can be relied upon is its unreliability. Planning for such events is vital. In the same way that an audit can be done on a wound breakdown, an audit can be applied to an episode of severe weather. Safety at work is all about minimising or eliminating hazards. Despite our best wishes, we cannot eliminate our weather. We can, however, reduce its impact with a bit of forward planning.

**Reference and further reading**
