Helping animals in disaster zones

Juan Carlos Murillo is a disaster response manager with the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), and the charity’s longest serving veterinary manager. He is always on the move.

MILLIONS of animals are affected by disasters across the world annually. As a veterinarian working in disaster response, my job takes me all over the world, often being deployed at a moment’s notice to disaster zones to help animals in need.

I am based in Costa Rica, deploying from WSPA’s office covering Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, but the charity has hubs across the globe, from London to Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. My team and I provide emergency aid to animals in areas affected by wars, hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis.

When disaster strikes and we receive the all clear for deployment from WSPA’s headquarters in London, we travel to the area as quickly as possible to help animals with everything from urgent injuries to vaccinating them against zoonotic diseases. Depending on the scale of the disaster, we may join forces with our global team members, as we did for the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Most recently, my team was deployed to the Philippines to help our colleagues deal with animals affected by Typhoon Haiyan.

As each disaster is different, it’s hard to know what to expect, but we need to think fast and respond quickly to what we find. We work to a master response plan but, when debriefing on the day’s activities, we often find that we need to change our approach and the operations director may decide to quickly turn things around.

In the field, we provide initial emergency treatment, access to food and water and training in animal handling and restraint. In some cases we build shelters to prevent animal fatalities in future disasters. When we help these animals, we are also helping the families who depend on them. Bringing hope to them is where I get the biggest sense of reward, although they may not understand the finer detail of our work, people’s smiles show how much difference we’ve made through helping their animals.

When Typhoon Haiyan tore across the Philippines in November 2013 it caused widespread devastation, leaving four million people homeless and killing between four and five million animals. Our team of disaster staff from across the world arrived four days later. We started by providing immediate treatment to animals that had been hurt. Another task was to identify areas that required vaccination campaigns. Ensuring that animals are protected from disease is a crucial part of emergency response. This is vital for ensuring animal health and productivity as well as safeguarding people.

After the animals’ immediate needs had been met we began thinking longer term. We ran emergency management workshops at the Aklan State University and the provincial veterinary offices of Aklan and Antique.

We also shared ideas on how to protect animals in the event of another disaster: the Philippines are regularly hit by typhoons, so it’s crucial people know how to protect their animals in an emergency. Construction of typhoon-proof animal shelters was some-
thing we learned from events in Cuba; we decided to adopt similar ideas using local materials. The new building used a combination of underground housing and buildings with removable roofing. This, we believe, is the first typhoon-proof farm and time will tell if the design is successful.

In the Philippines there is a strong bond between animals and people, many of whom completely depend on their animals for their income. It is those in poverty who are the most severely affected by typhoons; many families stand to lose absolutely everything if their animals are not rescued.

On this occasion, our campaign helped more than 17,500 animals across three of the affected Visayan islands – Cebu, Panay and Leyte.

I want to have a positive impact on the lives of animals all over the world and this goes beyond veterinary care alone. My role puts me in the fortunate position of being able to teach people how important it is to protect animals. In the Philippines, for example, we trained a new generation of emergency vets in stress-free movement of animals. They were our pioneers and we hope they will pass on what they have learned.

In some parts of the world people don’t think animals are sentient beings but as vets we must combat this and help people to understand animals’ needs. Ultimately, our aim is to get people to treat animals well; they’re so important. Even a disaster can have a positive outcome – by creating the opportunity for us to improve animal welfare.

Emma Batson is business manager at XLEquine. She has always had an interest in horses and, after a brief spell working with young racehorses in New Zealand, completed a PhD in equine physiology at the Royal Veterinary College, before working in industry.

What makes you tick, work-wise?
I’ve always had an interest in horses and, having survived a year working with young thoroughbreds in New Zealand, I did a PhD in equine physiology at the Royal Veterinary College. I then joined Merial Animal Health. During eight years with the company, I was lucky enough to get to know some of the leading lights in the equine veterinary industry.

My role at XLEquine is similar in many ways, but at the same time is also quite different! One of the most exciting aspects is being part of a team that can make a real difference to the working lives and success of our equine vets, and the benefits that brings to their clients. Equine diagnostics and medicine have advanced significantly, as have the challenges for modern equine practice.

With horse owners having greater access to information, client communication is key, so we ensure that our customers experience best practice horse healthcare.

Tell us about your career path.
It started with a biology degree and then the year in NZ, followed by my PhD, which focused on equine tendon biology and predisposition to injury. With Merial, I evolved through technical and business development roles, with the overall aim of raising the profile of its equine brand. Specifically, my focus was to increase sales of the equine portfolio, but included leading, motivating and developing a team of three dedicated equine specialists, an equine marketing and technical manager and a regional telesales coordinator.

How did you get the job with XLVets?
While at Merial I developed some strong relationships, both individually with XLEquine member practices, and also with the group. My new role is similar in that it involves working in partnership to deliver excellence in practice, as this is very much at the core of the ethos of the XLEquine brand, so it was a more natural progression than might be apparent.

What does a business manager do?
It involves developing the value of the brand, the benefits to the membership, and raising awareness of the brand within the veterinary industry. I also constantly seek to improve business processes and opportunities for member practices, and to develop campaigns to deliver excellence in practice and offer education and information to practice clients.

What made you move from an animal health company to private practice?
Although this is a very different type of business, I believed that I could apply much of what I had learned and enjoyed doing to develop my new role. I particularly aspired to the ethos of a collaborative working group to drive the future of independent practices. This role provides me with the opportunity to work at the sharp end of equine medicine.

What have you been doing so far?
Much of the collaborative efforts of the business involve sharing best practice, so there’s a strong focus on personal development and training, both for vet members and their clients.

Using the template of the XLVets FarmSkills training programme, we have developed EquineSkills, a new training scheme for horse owners. The first step was to organise for our equine vets to attend a training programme called ‘Train the Trainer’, which teaches techniques and methods to aid the delivery of practical instruction and course leadership. We also have VetSkills, which focuses on developing CPD for our young equine graduates or mixed practice vets, so there is a top level consistency of clinical knowledge, for example when dealing with an equine emergency. It also fosters an opportunity for camaraderie to develop among our members.

We have set up customer care training for all receptionists and customer-facing members of the team, which is a crucial part of client management and care and engages all members of the practice team with XLEquine. It’s vital that everyone can contribute to the ongoing success of the group.

A key element of my role is working in collaboration with independent organisations such as the Animal Health Trust with which we have spent the past few months embarking on an equine infectious diseases campaign. We will shortly be launching what we believe is the UK’s first fully comprehensive biosecurity information booklet for horse owners.

How do you see your role evolving?
The main focus is to keep developing initiatives that demonstrate the value that is offered, focusing on the client journey through an XLEquine practice. I will also continue to develop our collaboration with external organisations. Our marketplace is rapidly changing; a proactive and adaptable approach means that the opportunities created can be embraced.
Ten-minute chat

Emma Batson

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