



## What Precautions Should We Take For Pregnant Workers

When developing your hospital's policy for pregnant employees, keep in mind that the Supreme Court of the United States has upheld the law that prohibits an employer from removing an employee from their hazardous job simply because the employee is pregnant and the fetus may be affected. On the other hand, The Court did reaffirm that the employee must be capable of performing the essential elements of the job in order to be protected by this ruling. In other words, it would be appropriate to transfer a pregnant worker because she can not perform the physical tasks required of the job, but a transfer would not be appropriate just because she is pregnant.

It's also important to remember that there are numerous hazards pregnant women face in everyday life as well as on the job. In the past, the most common concerns have centered around exposure to radiation, waste anesthetic gasses and cats; those hazards are definitely controllable but many others warrant attention. Only a thorough understanding of the “big picture” will give the leaders and the staff member the information necessary to come to a workable solution.

To start with, every practice should have a written policy (as part of their employee manual) that requires staff members to notify the hospital leadership as soon as they become aware of their pregnancy. When this notification happens, the leadership must act in a timely manner – days not weeks – to counsel the staff member on the hazards and obtain her intentions about continued work. This session should not be portrayed as a negative one – it is merely the best way to find out the facts and come to an agreement. Do not make the staff member feel guilty about “putting the practice in a bind.” That would be inappropriate. Instead focus on how the practice and the staff member will interact during the next year – just like the type of coaching and goal setting that should be done on a regular basis!

Encourage the staff member to take a copy of the hospital's written Hazard Assessment of Workplace Conditions to her obstetrician for advice on what procedures warrant additional protection or avoidance. Be ready to make adjustments to your agreement based on input from the physician.

### Transfer vs. Leave

If the staff member requests a transfer to an administrative job, then the practice should accommodate the request if there is a position available. This does not mean that a position must always be created to accommodate the request. It's also not a chance for the staff member to draw a paycheck but not contribute to the work. If there is not a position available and it is not reasonable to create a temporary one, then the staff member is offered the chance to take pregnancy leave in accordance with the hospital policy on leave. Ask a local labor consultant or attorney for advice on setting up a fair policy.

If the staff member elects to stay on the job, make it clear that performance is still the key but be willing to make reasonable accommodations. For instance, the staff member could still administer medications and perform many animal husbandry chores, but it's reasonable to transfer any heavy lifting duties to other staff members. Also keep in mind that a person's physical limitations change as the pregnancy progresses – only slight difficulties may be evident when the agreement is made, but in the third trimester



the staff member may have severe limitations on standing, lifting or working. In some cases, the staff member may want to work throughout the pregnancy, but her physical condition changes rapidly and she may not be able to. At any point in the pregnancy that this happens, the best answer is to rethink the arrangement – transfer to an administrative job if one is available or pregnancy leave are still options.

## **Staying on the Job**

When the staff member stays on the job, reinforce the need to follow all safety policies. It's a great time to take another look at the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that is available and make sure it is not damaged and that it will still fit the staff member. Of course, replacement of defective or improperly sized devices is necessary.

Collect articles from journals and similar educational materials related to pregnancy and occupational exposure in the veterinary hospital. The staff member and the practice administrator should both educate themselves on the real risks and on what adjustments need to take place. Also check out chat areas of on-line services for information; often there will be bulletin boards dedicated to the subject.

Adopt very strict personal hygiene protocols when handling animals, animal exudates and chemicals. Thorough hand washing and the use of disposable gloves are the two most important factors in reducing the risk of exposure to hazardous chemicals or biological agents. Emphasize hazards and precautions associated with animal handling since an animal-related injury during pregnancy could be very serious to both the mother and the fetus.

In general, if proper PPE would make the procedure safe and eliminate the exposure, then the pregnant staff member could reasonably expect to perform the job safely. However, procedures where PPE is not used or mechanical controls are not available (e.g., pouring or mixing formaldehyde, mixing or administration of chemotherapeutic agents or the care of chemo patients, etc.) should be left to other workers at less risk.

Although the hazards in the veterinary practice are the same for male and female workers, those hazards take on a much greater threat to the developing fetus than they do to mature adults. With a healthy dose of common sense and a little planning, a pregnant staff member can be as productive during the pregnancy as she was before it. The practice as well as the staff member must make adjustments to the daily routine so that unnecessary risks are avoided and all practical precautions are observed. Only through the application of knowledge and practical procedures, will the hospital be safe.