

Rapid Response to Injury

By Paul S. McNamara, DVM, DACVS

[dek]*From the moment of injury until arrival at a veterinary hospital, your actions are critical to your canine's survival.*

In human trauma medicine, much attention is given to the so-called Golden Hour -- the first 60 minutes following the moment of trauma. Many studies have revealed that receiving appropriate care within the first hour after an injury is a critical predictor of survival. Strong correlations exist in veterinary medicine: the sooner a canine receives first aid -- and then advanced care -- the more likely that animal is to survive. Therefore, when a police service dog (PSD) is significantly ill or injured, your goal should be to get the canine to a veterinary facility as soon as is safely possible.

In a police canine medical emergency, the handler usually is the one responsible for initiating care, stabilizing the patient, and transporting the canine to the appropriate facility. Often that must be accomplished within a matter of minutes while the handler also is dealing with a stressful police event. As always, reverting to stress-management skills and training is vital to success. Maintaining your composure is critical. Following are some recommendations in the event that your canine partner is involved in a serious accident or medical emergency.

Remember the Basics

Before getting into the logistics of trauma management, it is important to review some basics. Well before an event the handler should have a written protocol that lists the locations of available veterinary practices. Your regular clinic may not be open after hours, so it is critical that you are aware of veterinary availability for all times and days. The protocol should be in writing and should be enacted *immediately* after a significant injury, illness, or trauma. Next, the handler should be prepared to handle an emergency by being proficient in canine first aid. That perishable skill needs to be refreshed periodically and the training received should be from a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about treating PSDs.

Once a police canine emergency occurs, a systematic approach will maximize efficiency and success. First and foremost, however, a police canine handler must be aware of his or her own safety. Remember, you are police officers first, canine handlers second. If, in the heat of the moment, you walk into a dangerous environment and become injured, you may inadvertently delay response to your canine partner's injury, because the focus must shift to safely removing you. *Remember your officer-safety tactics at all times.*

Next, initiate your trauma protocol and alert as many people as possible to the circumstances. That allows others to begin making appropriate contacts to ambulance services and veterinary practices while you are initiating care.

Observe and Document

Before attempting to move your canine partner, perform a cursory (or primary, if time allows) exam. Ensure that he is breathing and does not have a life-threatening condition that needs special attention, such as severe bleeding or a broken back. Create a safe

workspace for the exam by moving furniture or vehicles aside if necessary, and recruit colleagues to assist you. At this time you should evaluate the dog's heart rate, respiratory rate, level of consciousness, level of pain, and mucous membrane (gum) color. *Write your observations down.* The more you document, the less likely you'll be to forget critical information.

After you have performed a primary exam, prepare your partner for transport. If possible, muzzle your partner for your safety and the safety of those around you. Remember, if a dog is in pain or is disorientated, he may bite reactively. Also, others may be afraid to approach a dog to render assistance unless he is muzzled. Use a veterinary-style or gauze muzzle. *Never* use your working muzzle. Putting an agitation muzzle on your dog sends the wrong message to an animal that is already in distress and creates an environment in which the canine may consider people who approach to help him as threatening.

Next, transport your canine to a waiting vehicle. In many cases police canines can be transported by human ambulance, but that procedure should be addressed when you establish the trauma protocol, not in a crisis situation. Ideally, use a stretcher or long-board to stabilize the patient, minimize risk in case of spinal injuries, and distribute the dog's weight among several people. If a single person carries the dog, a fall can result in injury to both. Rapid carries such as the fireman's carry or the clutch carry should be used only if you need to evacuate an area immediately.

In the vehicle, make sure the patient is placed in a secure position that allows unrestricted breathing and easy monitoring. Ideally, the handler should not be responsible for driving to the veterinary clinic; rather, the handler should remain with his or her partner. Not only does that allow the handler to monitor the canine, it also has been shown to greatly reduce a dog's level of stress and anxiety. Don't forget, your partner is bonded to you and will be much more comfortable if he hears your voice, smells you, and feels your touch. *Use your relationship with your partner to both his and your advantage.*

Verify Information

Prior to transporting the patient, verify that contact has been made with the appropriate facility and that someone is awaiting your arrival. You do not want to arrive at a hospital only to find that no one is there. Next, confirm directions with your driver. Finally, transport the patient as safely and efficiently as possible, following your agency's policies regarding the use of lights, sirens, and so on.

When you arrive at the hospital, unless absolutely necessary, *do not* move the patient until the attending trauma team has assembled and developed a plan. Listen carefully and follow instructions as closely as possible. Most facilities used to working with PSDs will allow and encourage the handler to remain with his or her partner -- at least initially. You will be asked many questions; this is where it will be helpful to have as many facts in writing as possible so that even the smallest piece of information can be relayed and not forgotten.

Your partner's sudden illness or injury can be an emotionally stressful event, but advance preparation will help you make the most of that important 60 minutes after the trauma occurs. Following the basic steps outlined in this article will maximize your partner's chances of recovery.

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