

Caviary Safety
Denise Talbott, DVM

Several folks have offered suggestions on this article and mentioned problems that they would like to see addressed. Take from it ideas that you may not have thought about and remember that these accidents happen to all of us- from the experienced breeders to beginners. This article isn't about pointing fingers and assigning blame; it is about sharing problems that have plagued some of us in the past and hopefully it will help prevent them in the future so new folks don't have to make the same mistakes we have made.

BASIC ORGANIC STRUCTURE OF THE CAVIARY

The caviary should have sufficient ventilation and light and be constructed so that heating and cooling can be carried out on an as needed basis. It should have flooring that can be kept swept up (we know how those little rascals like to dance and kick out shavings) and a food storage system that will discourage pests such as rodents and weevils. There should be some sort of pest control system if flies, rodents, etc. are a problem. While convenient, the caviary doesn't have to have running water but it almost always needs to have electricity available.

Many of our outside caviaries are shed-like buildings that have either been purchased or constructed at home. Some of these are professionally wired, but many of them have an extension cord running out to the heater or AC and the lights. Remember that if the cord runs along the ground it is subject to being run over by a lawnmower and cut, being a tripping hazard (bad for humans!) and subsequently pulled out of socket on either end, etc., so that power to the building is interrupted. What would be better than the naked cord lying on the ground would be to encase it in PVC pipe or some other method to give it some protection from and for man and beast. If it is run up in the air, make sure it is up sufficiently high so that it doesn't choke someone walking by causing ye olde clothesline effect. No matter how electric is put into the caviary, think about getting a smoke/carbon monoxide alarm or detector to alert you when a problem may be developing. Follow good practices and don't demand too much from whatever system you have in place. Asking for the electrical system to do more than it was designed to deliver, failing to routinely check for worn cords or exposed wiring from natural aging and deterioration or rodent damage, etc. can have a disastrous consequence. Not only is fire a real concern, but having the system fail when you are counting on it providing either heat or more importantly air conditioning can put your entire caviary in jeopardy.

The caviary also needs to be secure. The control of all animals into and out of the caviary is governed by you. The caviary must be constructed so that larger animals like dogs, cats, raccoons and skunks don't have unauthorized access to your animals. A local rabbit friend had a raccoon come to his outdoor cages and reach through the wire and pull baby rabbits over to the side of the cage to be consumed. The other thing you want to think about preventing is unauthorized human entrance - be it from curious children to adults with an agenda. Enough said.

And finally, you need to have your caviary arranged so that you can get to those escapees! Either you need to be able to pull out your cages or reach under or just give up and let them live on the floor!

TEMPERATURE CONTROL AND VENTILATION

These two areas probably cause the greatest headaches and inadvertent loss of animals in our caviaries. Cavies are better adapted to living on the cooler side of the temperature spectrum and will start showing signs of distress much over 80 degrees. Heat also reduces feed consumption/condition and often results in greater loss in our litters.

It seems like summer is the time when folks have more trouble getting sows bred and littering successfully than any other season (I also think boars may very well have reduced fertility in the summer. I can't prove this that but it seems logical). Whether you use AC, or evaporative coolers, fans or whatever, it would be wise to have a remote sensor in good working order in your caviary and the readout somewhere in the house where it is viewed several times a day. AC units will ice-up in very humid conditions, and they can also become inefficient as the "radiator" part of the unit become clogged with dust (Dust in a caviary? You jest!) I have to clean mine regularly by vacuuming off the front filter and cleaning those cooling fins by spraying down with water. You can apply reflective film to the windows of the caviary in the summer. That may help to reduce radiant heat and using a reflective tarp on top of a building that has dark shingles shiny side OUT, may also reflect away a lot of the solar energy that is pounding down on the roof. You see this idea used on car windshields with those accordion reflectors all the time (and they actually should be used OUTSIDE the car, but few use them correctly I am told - thank you Mr. Editor ...*The wind blows away externally positioned sunshades, or thieves take them, thus we put the shades inside up against the windshield, sun visors pulled down to hold into place, which works almost as good. I also place a sunshade over the carriers to keep sun shining in the side windows and directly hitting animals. These may be purchase at any car parts store or large multi-goods store. - Editor*). You want to make very certain increasing the efficiency of your cooling system is not done at the expense of ventilation.

Fresh air is vital to the health and well-being of your animals. Placing the exhaust vent high will allow the warm air to be drawn off. Appropriate ventilation has been addressed in JACBA several times so let me just say here that ammonia levels can build up quickly to levels that are very irritating on eyes and the respiratory tract. This irritation may allow secondary invaders to take advantage of the situation. It is also bad advertising if you have prospective buyers in.

Controlling the temperature in the vehicles used to transport our animals is also vital. Know where the vents are, and in vans that may have dual controls, make sure all vents are on the same page as you are. Margo Purdy and I helped load some pigs into a van that the owner had been running the AC for 10 minutes to cool down the vehicle. Yet when we put the pigs in, we said, hey, it's still hot back here. We then discovered that while the AC was on up in the front, and the driver was quite comfortable, the heat was on in the back. **Again, using remote sensors can save your pigs.** I also use those window shields designed to keep the sun off children in the rear seats, and I use a white towel to cover the top of my cages where the sun might directly shine in to keep the pigs comfortable on the ride. The other thing I do in the summer sometimes is put on a light sweater while in the car to encourage me to run the AC higher than I might if I didn't have pigs in the back. Watch where the vents are located and where they are pointing. Even in winter with a cold car, you can fry your pigs if the vents are blowing directly on them. Again, remote sensors are well worth the cost.

FLOORING

While concrete is the easiest flooring to keep clean, it is also the hardest on the pig when you accidentally drop one or when one takes a leap out of an open cage door. **The JACBA editor uses cushioned mats in**

front of his cages to save the teeth and internal organs of his animals. Wood flooring isn't impervious to water and urine and over time will often start to weaken and delaminate if it is plywood and eventually need replacing. It is definitely a softer landing than concrete though!

HUMAN CONSIDERATIONS

As you look around your caviary, you need to think of what obstacles at various levels can potentially cause human injury, especially if you allow visitors into your caviary. The floor needs to be kept clean as we said before, and it also needs to be free of obstructions that you or guests can trip over. Carriers need to be secured so that they cannot tip over on a small child if they bump into them and really the same thing goes for our cages. Our cages need to be able to keep children away from the pigs (notice I didn't say it the other way around!) so that the only possible injury may be a nipped finger. It is very important to keep all medications and syringes/needles, etc. out of the reach of children and frankly out of sight of all visitors to our caviary. Agents that may cause harm to humans need to be put out of reach also. Folks are often very curious about all the paraphernalia common in the caviary and sometimes aren't reluctant to handle it. If you do let folks into your caviary, make sure you have a place available for the children to wash their hands after handling the pigs. Reinforcing good hygienic practices is really a must.

WATER AND FOOD

This really isn't a topic for caviary safety, probably more a topic for husbandry. However, if the water is foul, if the feed has molded, if the lettuce or vegetables have rotted, please do not expect your animals to consume them. Many GI disturbances are related to feed issues and can occasionally be very difficult to correct

Here is also the appropriate place to address how water and food are provided to our animals. Food should be provided in a container that cannot be overturned by the animal so that it routinely spills on the floor. Following the same line of thought, it is inappropriate to simply throw food in a pile on the cage floor. Cavies are not like rats or gerbils or hamsters- they have no desire to squirrel away their food in caches around the cage. Pigs foul their feed crocks fast enough with droppings and bedding, no need to start the job for them. For the same reason, crock waterers are not ideal for providing clean and sanitary drinking water for our animals- too easily fouled. (Yes, I used water crocks growing up, but I was also willing to change the water on my few pets several times a day. Back in my day, the tubes on waterers were either made of glass – which the pigs could and did crack and break or some cheap metal that the pigs put holes in on the bottom side, not the stainless of today.). This brings us around to the next point, providing water for our animals. Water bottles and automatic watering systems each have their advantages and disadvantages. Water bottles let you see in an instant if the water level is going down and allows you to gauge water consumption. They are also relatively easy to clean. The downside is that they often leak and are labor intensive, but again very easy to discern if they are clogged and you are vigilant. Automatic waterers on the other hand are much less labor intensive, but you also have the problem of having the valve stuck shut or open either leading to dehydration (and death) of the animal or potential drowning if the animal is in a tub with no drain and the valve is stuck open. Automatic systems are also more difficult to clean and sanitize. There is no perfect solution that I know of for watering. You simply have to address your own needs in your caviary and try to anticipate the problems each method may cause and deal with it. All sipper tubes and valves need to be confirmed daily of the capacity to deliver water to the animals.

QUARANTINE

One of the most important things we tend to overlook is putting new animals we acquire into quarantine or quickly removing animals showing signs of disease from contact with the rest of our herd. This can be very problematic since most of us don't have the facilities to completely re-house a new or ill animal to a separate area. The thing that I do is this: I keep them in translucent tubs away from the main part of the caviary that holds most of my animals. I also feed and water them last. Without having them all over the house and further raising my husband's ire (who over the years has very graciously accommodated...okay... just put up with the cavies) this is the best that I seem to be able to accomplish.

Except as specified below, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including electronically, or transmitted by any means without permission in writing from the American Cavy Breeders Association (ACBA). Copying: Single copies of individual articles may be

made for private use or research providing copies bear the ACBA copyright notice. Authorization does not extend to copies made or distributed for profit, commercial advantage, promotional purposes, to electronic storage or distribution, or to republication in any form. In all such cases, specific written permission from ACBA must be obtained. Permission for Other Use: Permission is granted for brief quotes with the customary acknowledgment of the source. To reprint a figure, table or other excerpt requires the consent of the ACBA. For permission contact the ACBA Secretary. Opinions of individual authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the ACBA, its board or officers.