Red in tooth and claw—and how to keep both away from your face

You, dear veterinary professional, don’t go out looking to be bitten or scratched, yet you probably have some sort of ‘battle scar’ from a bad encounter. Here’s how to prevent any more from happening in the future.

Even in an emergency situation where time is of the essence, rushing headlong into the situation without following proper procedures is a recipe for disaster. Most bite prevention techniques add less than a minute to the length of the procedure, but failure to take precautions can mean immediate, and sometimes permanent, disfigurement and pain. Not to mention that you won’t be able to help any animals while being treated for your injury or during your recovery. If you think it’s hectic now, how’s that injury going to affect the schedule?

Since it’s impossible to accurately predict which animals will bite and which ones won’t, it’s important to incorporate these prevention steps into every encounter with a distressed animal that must be removed from a vehicle:

- **Get help when possible.** It’s always safer when there are two people handling an injured or stressed animal in a vehicle.
- **Approach the patient from posterior side.** If the animal is injured and immobile, to judge the level of their pain or complacency upon first contact—don’t go straight for the end with the teeth! If the animal is cooperative, move to the head of the patient to proceed.
- **Put a slip leash on the animal.** After this, pass the leash through the window of the opposite door. Have someone hold on to the leash while you assess the patient’s condition or apply a muzzle. That way, the assistant can restrict the animal’s movement if it makes any aggressive moves while you are in a vulnerable position.
- **Always apply a muzzle before moving.** Before attempting any physical manipulation or movement of a distressed patient, apply a muzzle, as the movement will likely illicit a pain response. Lightweight nylon muzzles with quick release snaps are cheap, easy and most animals tolerate them readily.
- **Use a portable stretcher or cart.** Take this approach instead of carrying patients, even the small ones. The stability of the stretcher will make the patient more comfortable and less likely to react negatively. And the distance between you and the patient will allow extra time to react if they do attempt to bite.

In the end, the needs of the patient are important, but we should be smart in delivering on those needs. Self-preservation is essential for veterinary staff members. Stay safe!