A career with far-reaching effects

Valerie Romer, BS, RLATG, Import/Export Coordinator, Department of Animal Medicine, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA

Ms. Romer discusses the challenges and rewards involved in coordinating the transportation of research animals.

What first inspired your interest in working with animals?

I've loved animals since I was very young, and as I grew, so did my desire to work with them. The idea of being able to help animals, especially those in pain or injured, drove me to pursue a career in veterinary medicine. After graduating from Quinnipiac University in Lab Animal Technology, I started work in a small veterinary hospital, where I was able to put my knowledge and ambition to help animals to good use. After 11 years in this environment, I felt a change was needed. I wanted to do more with what I had learned over the years. Stepping into the research field allowed me to do this and to continue my work with animals.

The logistics involved in moving live animals over long distances must be complicated. Can you tell us about a particularly challenging shipment and how you kept it on track? Were there specific parts of your training, experience or education that prepared you well for these demands?

There are so many 'moving parts' in shipping live animals. Once the initial import or export forms are completed and approvals to receive or send animals are in place, there is the task of scheduling the shipments. Although this seems straightforward, this is where import/export coordinators need to become knowledgeable in transportation processes, weather forecasting and documentation that can often have expiration deadlines.

Several years ago, I was working on a live mouse shipment to Brazil requiring

numerous documents (customs invoice, Brazilian health certificate, packing list, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) form). Some of these forms needed endorsement by the state USDA office. Once the endorsements were in place and all the documents were ready, I needed to schedule transportation with the courier company. The mice had to arrive in a specific city in Brazil, because it was listed on the import permit that Brazil had in place. Only one of the airlines that flew to this city would carry live animals. The shipment was large (31 cages of mice in 11 crates), and the airline's planes were not large, so if they were carrying other cargo, the crates might not all fit. It took over a month of working with the courier to schedule the mice on a flight that had room for all the crates and that would be operating with ambient temperatures that could accommodate live mice. During that time, I had to obtain a second endorsement from USDA because those forms are only valid for 30 days once signed and stamped. From start to finish, this shipment took four months to complete. Having spent many years coordinating shipments previous to this export, I was able to work through the challenges that developed with the very dedicated help of the courier. In this business of shipping live animals, you have to expect the unexpected and be prepared for issues to arise.

In your current position, you work with investigators and facilities all over the world. Do you enjoy traveling yourself?

I do enjoy traveling and visiting new places. I wish I could do more! I have often laughed at how wonderful it would be to hand-deliver the animals I ship. Wouldn't it be fantastic to bring them to such places as Hawaii, England, Portugal, Spain, Australia, Brazil, Sweden or Switzerland?

What are your future or long-term career goals?

I hope to stay here at the University of Massachusetts and continue my career in the import/export world. Being able to assist investigators in getting the animals they need to allow their important research to thrive is very rewarding. And it makes me very happy to be able to ensure that the animals are well cared for before, during and after transport. This is the most important issue of all.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with *Lab Animal* readers?

I would like to take a moment to let readers know how key import/export coordinators are at their institutions. On a daily basis, we are tasked with coordinating many different shipments all at the same time and all at different levels of completion. Even though we try to standardize our process, each shipment can become unique with its own set of issues. This means that the communication between all involved—investigators, research staff, animal care staff, veterinary staff and courier companies—can be quite extensive and ever so important. It's what makes our job so interesting and worthwhile.