What is the protocol for rehabilitating badgers?

Consideration should be given to bovine tuberculosis when it comes to treating badgers for release back into the wild.

Around 400 badgers (Meles meles; Figure 1) are rehabilitated and released in England each year. This includes adult badgers, frequently admitted for reasons of anthropogenic trauma, and orphaned or abandoned badger cubs.

Approximately 36 percent of adult badgers are suitable for treatment, rehabilitation and release. Common reasons for presentation include: road traffic collisions (37 percent) (Figure 2), “territorial” conspecific wounds (55 percent) (Figure 3), old and/or diseased, and illegal digging, baiting, trapping and snaring injuries. Approximately 60 apparently abandoned and orphaned badger cubs are raised annually (Figure 4). These are usually clinically well but require a prolonged rearing and rehabilitation process before they can be released.

In common with other British wildlife species, there is no formal regulation of badger rehabilitation. Badgers are well protected in the wild (under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992); however, it is legal to bring these animals into captivity if they are injured, or dependent neonates, and treat them with the intention of eventually releasing healthy animals back to the wild. Once captive, badgers are protected under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Bovine tuberculosis precautions

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a disease in cattle caused by Mycobacterium bovis infection. M. bovis can affect a wide range of species, including humans, cattle and badgers. Both cattle and badgers, in common with other wild mammalian species, suffer from the disease. Infected badgers are able to maintain and spread infection. Excretion of bacteria may occur in saliva, urine, faeces and lymph node abscesses. Badgers may also transmit infection, via contaminated saliva, during social disputes that result in wounding (Figure 3).

Clinical signs of tuberculosis in badgers, as in other species, are typically weight loss leading to emaciation,