

Introduction

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Veterinary technicians are often described as the “backbone” of veterinary medicine, and while this is true, they are also at the front lines when it comes to patient care. Nowhere is this clearer than when nursing critical patients, where the ability to closely monitor and quickly assess patients is imperative. The care of critical patients is largely technician driven, as they provide hands-on, one-on-one nursing and observation throughout the patient’s stay in the intensive care unit. Technicians act as the primary caregiver to the critical patient, offering not only nursing care, but also attention, empathy, and advocacy.

Understanding the rapid changes that can occur with critical patients, sometimes from one minute to the next, is vital to optimal patient care, and timely identification of abnormalities is imperative to successful outcomes. Technicians need to recognize when changes in patient status necessitate notifying a clinician, and this decision must be made quickly. In critical nursing care, a small delay can be the difference between life and death. A structured, methodical approach simplifies patient assessment and contributes to rapid identification of complications.

Rebecca Kirby, DVM, DACVIM, DACVECC, is credited with the creation of the Rule of 20 for veterinary medicine. In fact, it is often referred to as Kirby’s Rule of 20. Kirby proposed the Rule of 20 as a checklist of parameters that should be assessed at least once daily in hospitalized patients (Box 1.1). The rule provides a systematic framework for evaluating critically ill patients, ensuring that no major body system is overlooked during daily monitoring and treatment planning.

Box 1.1 The Rule of 20	
1.	Fluid Balance
2.	Oxygenation and Ventilation
3.	Heart Rate
4.	Body Temperature
5.	Blood Pressure
6.	Neurological Status
7.	Electrolytes
8.	Acid–Base Balance
9.	Red Blood Cells and Hemoglobin
10.	Coagulation
11.	Albumin and Oncotic Pressure
12.	Renal Function
13.	Gastrointestinal Motility and Integrity
14.	Nutrition
15.	Glucose

(Continued)

Box 1.1 (Continued)

16. Immune Status and Antibiotics
17. Wound Healing and Bandaging
18. Drug Dose and Metabolism
19. Pain Control
20. Nursing Care and Tender, Loving Care

The first published mention of the rule is a Cornell University publication from 2000 that summarizes a lecture given by Dr. Kirby in 1999 at a meeting of the American Association of Feline Practitioners. It was published in two parts and is described as “The Rule of 20 for Cats” (Kirby, 2000a,b). In 2017, Kirby and Andrew Linklater, DVM, DACVECC, published *Monitoring and Intervention of the Critically Ill Small Animal: The Rule of 20*.

Comprehensive understanding of the Rule of 20 is imperative for technicians caring for critical patients. Mastery requires not only knowledge of each parameter but also the ability to use critical thinking skills to merge clinical findings and patient observations into a comprehensive patient picture. A strong awareness of the rules facilitates early recognition of even subtle signs of deterioration, allowing for rapid intervention. The parameters outlined in the Rule of 20 do not exist in a vacuum. Each parameter has the capacity to affect the others. Knowing what adjustments might cause shifts in other parameters and therefore alter the status of the patient will ensure patient monitoring is appropriately focused and any potential adverse changes can be anticipated.

Monitoring and Intervention of the Critically Ill Small Animal: The Rule of 20 is aimed mainly at veterinarians, with dedicated chapters for each parameter in the Rule of 20 and a single chapter dedicated to nursing care. Nursing care for each parameter is given a quick overview in just a few paragraphs (Kirby and Linklater, 2017). Kirby and Linklater’s book is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the medical management of critical patients but does not provide extensive information for technicians on how to use the Rule of 20 to provide excellent nursing care for their patients.

This book is written by credentialed veterinary technicians who use the Rule of 20 in their everyday nursing practice. It is intended to guide you through the Rule of 20 as it relates to the veterinary technician’s role in patient care. Each chapter focuses on one parameter, outlining their clinical relevance, methods of patient monitoring and assessment and providing practical information for use. You will find tables in each chapter examining the role of the parameter in relation to the other 19 rules, showing how critical thinking will aid in connecting the parts of the patient into a whole. Using the Rule of 20 should become second nature to all technicians involved in the care of critical patients. It is our hope that this book will help you understand how and why to use the Rule of 20, allowing you to approach your critically ill patients with confidence.

References

- Kirby, R. (2000a). Cats in crisis: the Rule of 20 part 1. *Feline Health Topics for Veterinarians*, 15(1): pp. 1–8. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/0453ea16-21ed-41ae-bd99-7448e1984313/content> (accessed 2 September 2025).
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