

Understanding & Managing the Rising Costs of Equine Veterinary Care

This article addresses a subject that I deal with on a daily basis – the rising cost of providing quality equine veterinary care. It is a topic many horse owners and veterinarians find uncomfortable, and is too rarely addressed.

These days, most services provided by modern and well-equipped equine veterinarians (from routine care to an unanticipated crisis) are costly. How can you, the horse owner, obtain the very best veterinary care for your horse without being financially overwhelmed?

The answer lies first and foremost in educating yourself and in maintaining good communication with your equine veterinarian. As discussed below, these points go hand in hand.

WHY IS EQUINE VETERINARY MEDICINE SO EXPENSIVE?

The overhead costs associated with running a full service equine veterinary facility are higher than for small animal practices and rise each year.

To keep businesses running and be compensated fairly, equine veterinarians must pass these costs onto clients. Let's start with the basics: Veterinary charges for horses are much higher than those for small animals simply because of their size. The same amount of medicine necessary for effective treatment of a small animal must be multiplied on a scale of 10 to more than 100 times for an effective dosage in a horse.

Likewise, the facilities needed must be much larger and specialized to handle horses. Equine veterinarians that offer full-service care must invest in real estate large enough to host a hospital and associated structures, including stalls,

round pens, turnouts, and more. For mobile vets, the cost of being on the road is high, mostly in terms of travel time.

As for any small business, the basic operating cost of doing business (overhead) is high for veterinary practice and continues to increase. Equine veterinary practice has especially high overhead. Relatively large inventory, higher rates of liability insurance, utility expenses for complex and large facilities, fuel and maintenance costs for mobile units, specialized staffing, and all other costs are high and continue to increase.

Unlike small animal practice (in which many regions have 24-hours emergency centers), most equine vets handle their own after-hours emergencies. Vets and support staff must be compensated for their extraordinary accessibility and availability.

Dedicated, highly trained equine professionals are hard to find and demand higher wages for their higher level of equine training, and commitment to after-hours emergency care.

As is the case in human healthcare, the trend toward increasing specialization in equine veterinary care results in increased cost. Equine dentistry, surgery, anesthesia, imaging, and treatments have all reached new levels of sophistication in private practice, and new levels of cost. Highly sophisticated and costly MRI, nuclear medicine, and other specialized are increasingly becoming the standard in private practice. While all of these advances mean more options for horse care, they also account for greatly increased cost.

This trend toward specialized and expensive services in private practice is driven to a great extent by better-informed horse owners that demand the best health care for their horses. However, as in human healthcare, there is a Catch-22: Someone has to pay for this higher level of care.

Drugs purchased through your equine veterinarian are typically

more expensive than those purchased through veterinary supply catalogs. This difference relates to the costs of inventory, labor, administrative costs and quality control, which are relatively much higher than for a large supply company. A responsible equine veterinarian is constantly trying to maintain a delicate balance by anticipating his or her client's needs, keeping certain drugs available for immediate dispensation, yet trying to keeping the overhead cost for unused inventory at a manageable level.

Several real advantages in buying products from your veterinarian are convenience and 24-hour support and consultation. Likewise, emergency services provided by equine veterinarians reflect the fact that being available 24/7/365 requires major lifestyle compromises that require appropriate compensation.

10 WAYS TO ENSURE YOUR HORSE'S GOOD HEALTH & REDUCE YOUR COST

Given these high and rising costs, what can you do to control the cost of keeping your horse healthy and performing at a high level?

1. EDUCATE YOURSELF. The single greatest reason why clients spend excessively on their horse is lack of knowledge and preparation. Your equine veterinarian can help you choose the right products and services and can direct you toward reliable educational resources. In a complex world of expensive "miracle" supplements and bogus claims, your veterinarian can guide you in basic care, preventative medicine, and the healthcare that your horse really requires. Many expensive equine products actually have no benefit and some may even be harmful. Vendors can make any claims they want about their products. There is almost no regulation and many promote their products shamelessly and misleadingly. View these products with a critical eye and when in doubt, ask your vet for advice.

2. PROVIDE GOOD BASIC CARE. Invest in the basics, including a clean and safe environment, proper fencing, shelter, turnouts,

quality hay and grain, water, and hoof care. I can't tell you how often complicated and expensive health care issues arise simply because good basic care has not been provided.

3. *ROUTINE & PREVENTATIVE CARE.* Ideally, your veterinarian sees your horse twice a year for spring and fall work. Vaccination is only a small part of this. The real value lies in the consultation that your vet provides during that visit. Your veterinarian performs a dental exam (and dentistry only if needed), and becomes familiar with your horse in health and with your needs and desires. It is important that a veterinarian know your horse in health, so they can better evaluate your horse when a health care issue arises.

4. *COMMUNICATION.* Establish good communication with your veterinarian right away when you perceive a problem. Contact them even when you have general questions about your horse's care. Always promptly call if your horse has received recommended treatment and is not responding or seems to be doing poorly. A minor adjustment in treatment may be all that is needed to turn things in the right direction.

In today's world, you can effectively communicate so much through a good photo or short video taken with a smartphone. Use this technology to help you communicate efficiently and effectively with your vet.

5. *RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF A DIAGNOSIS.* When you observe a problem with your horse, prompt consultation with a knowledgeable professional is usually less expensive in the long run than purchasing expensive supplements or utilizing alternative therapies without a diagnosis. A diagnosis gets to the heart of the problem, and is essential to choosing the correct and most efficacious treatment plan.

6. *ACT QUICKLY.* Contact your equine veterinarian the moment you notice a problem. They can help you determine whether examination is necessary. If you don't call, your horse may well improve on it's own, but the problem might also worsen. This gamble could increase the final veterinary bill and

worsen the prognosis.

Recognize signs of common emergency conditions: Always call your veterinarian immediately if you suspect your horse has colic, choke, foaling problems, eye problems, severe lameness, and wounds located near joints or that seem otherwise complicated or deep.

With early veterinary contact, some of these problems may be successfully managed with a simple phone call or simple treatments rather than life saving, expensive heroics later on. The key is communication and mutual trust.

7. OPTIONS & ESTIMATES. There is rarely a single solution to an equine health problem. Ask your veterinarian for different treatment options and an estimate for the cost of each. Although expensive treatments exist and are becoming more and more available, they are not necessarily the best option in all circumstances.

One of your vet's most important jobs is to inform you of the range of options available to you and the costs and benefits of these options. It can be difficult to make these decisions in the moment of crisis.

For that reason, I encourage horse owners to consider their general approach to this question before such a moment arrives. Become informed by reading articles such as "Colic Surgery: What Horse Owner's Should Know," which encourages horse owners to consider what they would do when faced with this difficult decision beforehand.

8. CLINIC VS. FARM CALLS. Transporting your horse to an equine veterinary facility can be less costly than a farm call, which includes the veterinarian's driving time, vehicle mileage and the ever-increasing cost of fuel.

If you don't have a trailer, make a friend with someone who does. Many specialized services can often only be delivered in a clinic situation. On the other hand, recognize that a farm call is a luxury that is becoming more and more expensive

to provide.

9. EQUINE MEDICAL & MORTALITY INSURANCE. There are a number of insurance companies that provide equine insurance, which can be a lifesaver in a moment of crisis.

The equine supplement company Smartpak provides colic treatment and surgical compensation programs to customers feeding their supplements, if they conform to certain guidelines, including basic services provided by a vet. See www.smartpakequine.com/colicare.

10. SPECIALIZED FINANCING. Several companies offer a line of credit for health care expenses that can be used for veterinary care. Given how difficult it is for veterinary practices to finance their clients, we encourage horse owners to consider securing this financing instead.

You can apply for a line of credit at the time it is needed or beforehand. Nevertheless, it is important to fully understand the terms of repayment and compare the fees, penalties (especially for late payments), and interest rate to your other available funding sources. *Carecredit is an example* www.carecredit.com.

CONCLUSION

Horse ownership is expensive and proper veterinary care accounts for a significant percentage of that expense.

Ultimately, the relationship you have with your equine veterinarian will guide you and your horse down a balanced path. Use them as a sounding board to help you determine the level of care you are comfortable with, and discuss the costs of these services frankly and openly.

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