



Partners In Practice

Business Solutions for Equine Practitioners

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Offer high-quality care with preventive dental services

Providing in-depth dental care boosts practitioners' income and helps ensure horses live long, healthy lives.

By Julie Gurnon

What do waves, ramps, hooks, and transverse ridges have in common? They're all abnormalities that can cause malocclusion in a horse's mouth. If you're an equine practitioner who is unfamiliar with these terms, it's time to invest in the necessary resources that will elevate the level of dentistry services you provide. Why? Because you can no longer rely on floating alone to meet the needs of your patients—and your pocketbook.

No small task

Floating a horse's teeth—whether by hand or with power tools—refers to the process of removing the sharp enamel points that develop on a horse's upper and lower premolars and molars (cheek teeth). But that's only a small portion of a much larger picture. The *Equine dental dictionary* on page 2 describes some of the dental conditions and treatments equine practitioners must look for and perform to keep their patients comfortable and healthy. These conditions can also depend on age. For example, younger horses may fail to lose their

deciduous teeth, and many horses in their late teens or 20s develop pockets between the teeth that can lead to periodontal disease, says Jack Easley, DVM, MS, DABVP, an ambulatory equine veterinarian in Shelbyville, Ky., who has 30 years of dentistry experience.

Dentistry is just one of multiple services Dr. Easley and Aimee Eggleston, DVM, a solo ambulatory equine veterinarian based in Woodstock, Conn., provide their clients. However, equine dentistry—like human dentistry—can be a full-time job itself. Just ask Tom Allen, DVM, a solo ambulatory practitioner certified by the International Association of Equine Dentistry (IAED) and author of *The Manual of Equine Dentistry*. Based in Patterson, Mo., Dr. Allen switched to a dentistry-only practice in 1998, and the need for his services hasn't abated. "I recently saw an 8-year-old horse that had just received dental treatment from a veterinarian three weeks earlier. The horse was 80 to 100 lbs underweight, and there was no evidence that the enamel points in the back half of his mouth had been touched," he says. "The veterinarian also told the owner that the horse had four

INSIDE

5 Ask *Partners In Practice*

- What is the difference between an LLC and a corporation?
- I would like to build a new clinic. How will I know if or when I can afford it?

6 Client Education

Set your 'sites' online

8 Real Solutions

Tried and true marketing strategies



RESEARCH • PERFORMANCE • INTEGRITY

Equine dental dictionary

Bit seats: The process of rounding over the fronts of the first large cheek teeth to accommodate a bit more comfortably. This is important even for horses that will never be bitted because it allows food to be more easily positioned for mastication.

Canine teeth: Teeth found in the space between the incisors and the molars.

Caps: Another term for retained deciduous teeth in young horses.

Equilibration: The art and science of balancing a horse's teeth to enhance mastication, nutrition, and performance.*

Hooks: Dagger-like spikes that develop on the front and back ends of the upper cheek teeth.

Incisor reduction: Part of the equilibration process that involves shortening overlong incisors to ensure molar contact.

Malocclusion: Literally means "bad contact." Incisor and cheek teeth malocclusion prevents horses from processing food properly.

Ramps: Ski-jump-like formations that develop on the lower cheek teeth directly behind the location where the bit sits.

Steps: An overgrowth found on a molar and caused by a lack of occlusion.

Waves: Humps in the lower line of cheek teeth

Wolf teeth: Small teeth directly in front of the first cheek teeth (upper and rarely lower).

*Source: The Association for Equine Dental Equilibration Inc. (www.equinedentistry.com/associations/association_page.html)

loose, rotten teeth, but the doctor didn't remove them or tell the owner what to do about them."

In addition to the large number of potential problems horses face, the need for in-depth dental care stems from the adverse consequences that can result if those problems aren't caught and treated early. Dr. Allen emphasizes that without preventive treatment, dental problems in horses can lead to painful, uncomfortable conditions or systemic diseases that negatively affect gait, reproductivity, and even longevity. Sometimes there are no signs of dental problems at all. "I see fat, healthy-looking horses that have serious, life-threatening problems with their mouths," he says. "If a problem exists, horses can't show or tell their caregivers effectively, so veterinarians won't find the problem unless they look for it."

The bottom line: What happens in a horse's mouth is too important to ignore or treat inadequately. When she encounters horses that require complicated treatments, Dr. Eggleston refers those cases to a colleague in the area who specializes in dentistry. Fortunately, veterinarians and technicians can learn dentistry through a variety of continuing education opportunities, including those offered by the IAED (www.iaedglobal.com), American School of Equine Dentistry (www.amschedentistry.com), and American Association of Equine Practitioners (www.aaep.org). Dr. Allen suggests an even easier way to learn dentistry: Hire an experienced veterinarian or technician to come to your practice and teach you.

Hand vs. power

Dr. Eggleston has been in practice for eight years, and she's performed basic power dentistry since her days as an intern. She has found that her patients accept power tools better than hand tools—but this doesn't mean that hand tools can't do the job as effectively. "Good dental technique depends on the person using the tool, not the tool itself," Dr. Allen says. "Someone performing an incisor reduction, for example, can take too much off by hand just as easily as someone using a power tool." While all three doctors use power tools and sedation on most patients, they still carry and use hand tools in certain circumstances. Dr. Allen and Dr. Eggleston use hand tools when their power instruments can't reach the enamel points on the upper 10 and 11 molars, and Dr. Eggleston likes to use hand floats for touch-up and finishing work. Still, all three doctors say the advantages of power tools and sedation outweigh hand tools for a few simple reasons:

Thoroughness. To perform a detailed oral examination, veterinarians need to see and feel the horse's entire mouth (all the way to the back). That's much easier to do with a full-mouth speculum, a high-powered headlight, and a patient with a still head.

Timeliness. Power dentistry takes less time, which puts less pressure on horses' jaws, especially the temporomandibular joint mechanisms.

Results. Certain procedures are impossible to do with hand tools. Using power tools makes it easier for veterinarians to correct such problems as severe wear abnormalities, tall teeth, hooks, and waves—and do a better job performing them.

Self-preservation. Hand floating is hard on the body. Dr. Eggleston knows a veterinarian who had to take a leave of absence because of shoulder and elbow problems caused by hand floating. Forced to switch to power floating, the veterinarian (a highly skilled hand floater for 13 years) later admitted that

Equine oral examinations

The following guidelines are based on the combined input of Drs. Allen, Easley, and Eggleston.

General examination*

Items to obtain or evaluate	Specifics
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horse in stall or out in pasture? • Problems eating? • Weight loss? • Diarrhea or loose stools? • Other issues?
Heart and respiratory rates	Heart rate usually 36 to 40 beats/minute (can be higher when a stethoscope is applied (up to 60 beats/minute); respiratory rate 12 to 24 respirations/minute
Gut sounds	Usually two to three per minute
Body condition	Use a weight tape to measure the horse's girth and estimate its body weight
Diet	A great opportunity for nutrition counseling
Bit issues	
Environment	Evidence of chewed wood, dropped feed, or hay with whole pieces of grain or corn in it?

Oral examination**

Action	Specifics
Rinse mouth with water	Check for: bad odor, excessive amount of packed food, and whether wear of teeth correlates to age of horse
Measure and record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside edges of TMJs • Anterior/posterior movement • Incisor table angle • Overjet or underjet • Incisor line • Molar occlusion
Examine and palpate	Every tooth and surrounding tissues
Check for problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacerations, abrasions, or oral ulcers on cheek tissue • Wolf teeth and canine teeth • Malocclusions (enamel points, hooks, ramps, waves, steps, transverse ridges) • Biting issues • Tartar, plaque, and periodontal disease

*Performed in a horse's normal environment.

**Veterinarian should restrain horse in stocks, administer sedative, and insert a full-mouth speculum.

***Most adult horses will need power floating at least once a year because few are kept in pastures for extended lengths and have perfect dental occlusion. Horses between 2 and 5 years old need oral examinations and any necessary treatment at least twice a year (perhaps more) because they are constantly losing deciduous teeth and erupting permanent teeth during this period.

power instruments enabled him to do even better job.

Tools of the trade on page 4 lists the equipment most practitioners will need to practice equine dentistry.

Addressing the financial need

Considering the scope of equine dentistry and the enormous impact oral health has on horses, it's easy to understand why providing thorough dental care is

so important. But you can't keep horses' mouths healthy if your business isn't financially healthy—missing or ignoring dental problems equates to missed charges and revenue.

Performing dental work on horses is quite similar to the work dentists perform on people. *Equine oral examinations* details the first two parts of an equine dental visit: a general and an oral examination. The

Tools of the trade

The type of equipment equine practitioners need to perform good preventive dentistry depends on the services they offer.

Tools for examination and floating

- Power tools (usually a range of attachments run by one generator)*
- Hand floats (with several types of heads, shafts, and/or grips)
- Full-mouth speculum
- Head cradle (or a technician to hold the horse's head still)**
- Syringes (to administer anesthesia or antibiotics)
- High-powered headlight
- Mirror
- Gloves
- Dental picks
- Packing material (if you choose to pack extraction sockets)
- Water source (to cool and flush the mouth).

Additional tools for treating or correcting dental problems

- Instruments such as extractors, forceps, and rongeurs
- Molar spreaders, cutters, and nippers.

* Grinding a tooth for no longer than one minute before flushing or moving on to another tooth will prevent thermal damage, says Tom Allen, DVM.

**To avoid litigation resulting from injury, do not allow horse owners or untrained personnel to help restrain a horse.

subsequent treatment protocol depends on the veterinarian's findings.

Drs. Easley, Allen, and Eggleston recommend that all horses receive an in-depth oral examination, power floating, and any other necessary preventive treatment at least once a year. "Sharp enamel points can cause cheek lacerations in horses as young as 6 months of age," Dr. Allen says. "Those lacerations are already allowing toxins and bacteria to enter a horse's system and affecting its lifespan." The exception: Young horses will probably need two to four annual checkups (depending on their activities) because they're continuously losing deciduous teeth and erupting permanent teeth between the ages of two and five.

The fees Drs. Easley, Allen, and Eggleston charge for an in-depth oral examination and sedation range from \$45 to \$60. After entering their findings (by hand

or via computer) on a dental examination record, the doctors give clients their treatment recommendations (which they also record) and the estimated cost. For horses receiving regular dental care, the average cost per visit ranges from \$100 to \$160 with treatment. That means for every 100 patients you examine, dental services offer the potential to generate from \$10,000 to \$16,000 in revenue each year.

Convincing reluctant clients

Educating clients and taking a strong stance are key factors in getting anxious clients to accept power dentistry. In fact, dentistry visits are one of the few services that easily lend themselves to client education. "Equine veterinarians spend most of their time responding to emergencies or rushing from appointment to appointment," Dr. Easley says. "Dentistry takes a little time, so it's a wonderful opportunity to visit with clients, find out what's been going on, and talk about dentistry and nutrition." Drs. Allen and Eggleston agree. All three doctors say that one of the best ways to illustrate the importance of dentistry is to show clients the inside of a horse's mouth and allow them to feel the horse's teeth. "Most owners don't know about the basics of equine dentistry, let alone the potential problems that can affect a horse's performance," Dr. Eggleston says. "When clients can feel for themselves and you detail your findings and recommendations on a dental record, clients will see the value they're getting for their money."

It's also important to stand firm about power dentistry for a regular in-depth oral examination. Dr. Eggleston uses the following approach: She tells clients that power dentistry is the standard of care in the equine dental community and the best care for their horse. If she still catches an indecisive tone in a client's voice, she asks the client to at least let her come out, sedate one horse, and demonstrate why it works better. She's never had a client ask for hand floating again.

Conclusion

Equine dentistry isn't about sneaking a peek in an unrestrained horse's mouth and filing down a few sharp enamel points—equine dentistry involves much more. So much more, in fact, that veterinarians and horses both lose out when they don't give and receive proper dental care. By learning how to give in-depth oral examinations, you'll boost your income and enable horses to live longer, healthier, more comfortable lives. That will give you, your patients, and your clients plenty to smile about. ■

Julie Gurnon is a freelance writer and editor in Olathe, Kan.

Ask Partners In Practice

Your questions answered by top equine industry experts

Q What is the difference between an S corporation and a limited liability company? Which one should I choose?

A Limited liability companies (LLCs) have existed since 1977, when Wyoming enacted the first LLC statute in the United States. Most other states did not provide statutes for LLCs until after 1988, when the Internal Revenue Service issued revenue rulings that classified the Wyoming LLC as a partnership for federal income tax purposes, despite their limited liability. Since then, all 50 states have adopted limited liability company acts.

Like a corporation, an LLC insulates its owners (referred to as members) from personal liability for the obligations of the entity. For federal income tax purposes, it is classified and treated as a partnership unless the members elect to be taxed as a corporation. An S corporation represents a compromise between corporate and partnership taxation.

Subject to your state statutes, LLCs afford the same liability protection with much less formality than an S corporation—while maintaining the required structure to prevent piercing the corporate or LLC veil. LLCs can also:

- have unlimited owners (an S corporation can only have 75 shareholders)
- be managed by all members
- be owned by corporations, partnerships, trusts, or other entities (S corporations can be owned only by individuals, estates, and certain trusts)
- offer several classes of stock shares
- have nonprorated distributions
- allow for flexible retirement payments.

Take note: Some states (*e.g.*, Washington) require LLCs to have \$1 million liability insurance. Even still, if your practice is in a state that has an adequate LLC statute (which most states do), then I strongly advise that equine practitioners and other veterinarians consider setting up an LLC rather than an S corporation—but always seek advice from your local counsel before forming any business entity.

Karl Salzsieder, DVM, JD
Salzsieder Consulting & Legal Services
Kelso, Wash.

Q I just hired a second veterinarian and would like to build a clinic. How will I know if—or when—I can afford it?

A Whether you can afford to build a new clinic depends on many financial factors, such as:

- the cost of the project
- the expected increase in revenues once you move in
- the change in expenses you will incur in the new building
- the financing that you can secure
- the amount of money you are able or willing to invest in the project.

Typically, a practitioner's financial advisor will prepare projections that show what the project's expected cash flow will be under different scenarios (*e.g.*, is the project affordable if the building costs \$150/sq. ft., the revenues are expected to increase 20%, and the owner has \$500,000 to invest?).

Some estimates used in cash flow projections can be determined fairly precisely (*e.g.*, the cost of construction and financing rate), whereas others are more difficult to approximate (*e.g.*, how much the revenue will increase once a practice moves into a new facility). To get the best

results from this analysis, it is important to estimate these numbers as best you can. There is usually an "if you build it, they will come" factor, but the more you can determine what you're specifically going to do to build revenue, the more likely you are to be successful.

Sometimes it becomes clear early on that building a new facility at this time is just not possible. More often, it's a matter of being realistic about what you can do. It is essential to run the cash flow projections several times before you can determine the right balance among all of these financial factors. ■

Karen E. Felsted, CPA, MS, DVM, CVPM
Gatto McFerson, CPAs
Santa Monica, Calif.

Q&A

Send your questions to *Partners In Practice* by:

• **Mail:** 8033 Flint,

Lenexa, KS 66214

• **E-mail:**

partnersinpractice

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• **Fax:**

(913) 492-4157

• **Voice mail:**

(800) 255-6864, ext.

149. Include your

name, title, hospital

name, address, and

phone number.

Some estimates used in cash flow projections can be determined fairly precisely, whereas others are more difficult to approximate.

CLIENT EDUCATION

Strategies for communicating effectively about horse healthcare.



Set your 'sites' online

You may be surprised how a website can help educate clients.

Imagine instilling confidence in clients with just a click of a button. It's not as far-fetched as it sounds. Occupational websites hold the potential to reassure regulars and recruit prospective clients with minimal maintenance.

Greg Smith, DVM, founder of East County Large Animal Practice in El Cajon, Calif., is a perfect example of how beneficial a website can be. Working with the success of his practice's website, www.eclap.org, Dr. Smith shows you how uploading a proper website can download you a wide world of business.

Offline equals sidelines

"People go to the Internet, not the yellow pages," Dr. Smith says. "You're going to miss business if you're offline." With its 24-hour access and international use, the Internet can increase your reach dramatically.

According to surveys conducted by PEW Internet & American Life Project in 2006, a record-breaking 147 million adults in America use the Web. Roughly 17 million of these adults surf daily to research products and services. For Dr. Smith, this factors into an average 55 visits to his site a day. That's 55 opportunities every day to introduce and reinforce his practice!

Easy access for clients

Stop answering repetitive questions and save yourself valuable time—use your website as a reference tool and direct clients with questions there. You and your staff will be amazed at your increased productivity when clients come prepped on procedures, prices, and packages. Instead of explaining the basics, you'll be able to go into specifics with educated clients. In-depth websites also help to reinforce what you say to your clients, Dr. Smith says, by providing them with another source. Plus, an in-depth site reinforces your reputation. "A quality website suggests a quality practice," he says.

The simple fact that clients can access information about your practice before visits also boosts confidence. Clients feel better when

they know what to expect from you and your practice, especially when it comes to fees. Including rates is a definite for your site, but including any packaged rates is even better. Showing how much a client could save by choosing your practice or package of services versus the competition or simply paying for each procedure separately is wildly popular, Dr. Smith says. You just have to make sure your prices stay current.

Your building blocks

You don't have to be technology savvy to start a website—although having an IT layperson in the office does help, Dr. Smith says. All you need is creativity and content.

What's important, Dr. Smith says, is branding your practice. As a marketing tool, your website should stand out and highlight the strengths of your practice. Use the Web to showcase your services, equipment, and anything else that sets you apart. Adding information on related material, such as breeding, is one more way to add value to your site. Just be careful on overdoing visuals, Dr. Smith says. Too many visuals can easily distract from the content, Dr. Smith says. ■

Reign your domain

Think you have to pay someone big bucks to post your practice online? Think again. You can create and maintain your own website for less than \$10 a month. What can you get for \$10 bucks a month? You'd be surprised. Most web-creation companies provide you with a minimum web space, a domain name (a website's name or web address), an e-mail form for visitors to contact you through your site and extras like guest books.

To learn more about creating your own website, visit:

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¹ Monath TP. Yellow fever: an update. *Lancet*. 2001; 1: 11-20.



REAL SOLUTIONS

Implement these winning ideas from other equine practitioners.

Tried and true marketing strategies

Try these tips from fellow practitioners to bring in more business.

Get involved in your community

The best marketing strategy to grow my practice has been community involvement—no matter whether the activities involve animals or not. The doctors in our practice participate in such activities as the Pony Club, 4-H, sled dog racing, Boy Scouts, and youth hockey. We all take active roles to support local organizations and meet many new people at these events.

This involvement demonstrates our sincere commitment to the community, and having five doctors on staff shows that we represent diverse interests. We never turn down requests from local schools to participate in mentorship programs, career fairs, science fairs, or lectures for biology or science classes. By giving back to the community, we can thank local individuals for supporting our business.

Gail Hoholik, DVM
Manistique, Mich.

Institute a vaccination series

Vaccination season offers a perfect opportunity for equine practitioners to market their practice. I now realize this after having launched my own solo practice 20 years ago. My approach was to divide vaccinations into two to three visits given in seven- to 10-day intervals with only one initial call charge. My intention was to avoid overwhelming the horses' immune systems on one visit. As a result, owners gained confidence that I had their horses' best interests at heart. Vaccine reactions were minimal. An unexpected advantage was the income generated by the "Oh, while you're here can you look at this?" situations, which usually led to many more visits. By word of mouth alone, this vaccination program became very popular.

Sandra P. Silva is our winner! She will receive \$100 for submitting this practice tip.

Sandra P. Silva, DVM
Reading, Vt.

Want to earn an easy hundred dollars?



We're looking for your wonderful ideas to share with other equine practitioners. Send us your answer to the question below, and we'll publish it (as space allows). If yours is the best of what we receive, we'll send you a check for \$100. Here's the question:

What has been your best lesson learned about equine practice management?

Please keep your answer to 200 words or less and e-mail it to partnersinpractice@intervet.com. If you prefer, you can fax it to (913) 492-4157 or mail it to *Partners In Practice*, 8033 Flint, Lenexa, KS 66214. We reserve the right to edit submissions for space, clarity, and suitability.

Dental incentive program

Three years ago, we began an incentive program for our clients by offering a discount during the months of January and February for teeth floating. We currently offer a 20% discount for this procedure if clients pay at the time of service. This strategy has increased our number of floatings we perform by 105% over the past three years, with a \$20,000 annual increase in revenue. Because this is a cash service, our accounts receivable does not increase and our veterinarians stay busy during the slow season. ■

Jeff Weatherhead
Practice manager
Salmon Brook Veterinary Hospital
Granby, Conn.

Partners In Practice is brought to you by Intervet and offers equine practitioners tools for financial success. The editors welcome submissions, suggestions, and questions. To reach us, write *Partners In Practice*, Editorial Office, 8033 Flint, Lenexa, KS 66214; e-mail partnersinpractice@intervet.com; or call (800) 255-6864, ext. 169. Copyright 2007 by Intervet Inc., 29160 Intervet Lane, Millsboro, DE 19966. Reproduction without prior permission from Intervet is prohibited.

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