

Dentistry is key to horse's health

BY MONTIE TAK
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ANNVILLE — Some people say you should never look a gift horse in the mouth.

But Veterinarian Ron Stuber, says having a qualified dentist look at those equine pearly whites is basic to your horse's health.

He and his associate, Dr. Holly J. Wendell, have as many as 1000 dentistry patients per year. And with 40 teeth per male horse — mares customarily lack the four canine teeth — that's looking at a lot of teeth.

While a horse may not get cavities, there is a vast array of oral problems a horse may have, and these problems can affect the entire animal. "Without proper care of teeth, a horse will not eat properly," says Dr. Stuber. "If the food is not assimilated properly, a lot of whole grain will pass out in the manure."

Sharp edges on the teeth, if neglected, can produce chronic erosion of the lining of the mouth and acute lacerations of the tongue. Dr. Stuber recommends that horse owners first have a veterinarian check a horse's teeth when the animal is about two years old, or even sooner if they think there is a problem.

Between the ages of two and five years, horses lose their caps or "baby teeth" as the permanent

teeth come in. Sometimes the caps do not come off completely and get wedged in place; other caps may become loose but not loose enough to come off.

Other problems may arise because of the presence of wolf teeth. Wolf teeth, the first premolars, often times give problems with driving horses because of the use of an overcheck bit, which comes higher in the mouth," points out Dr. Stuber. "I pull wolf teeth routinely as a temperament problem can well be because of wolf teeth."

He says the best time to remove these is between two and three years of age. Even if you have an older horse he recommends their removal.

While your horse may not be able to ask for an annual check-up, there are signs a perceptive owner can note. A horse may hold his head to one side or give difficulties with the bit, have problems chewing or be indifferent at feeding time. Dr. Stuber says, "We find people really find a change in the horse's eating habits and manners under saddle if a horse's mouth has been badly in need of attention. It won't change every horse, but it can help."

One important factor in horse dentistry is that equine teeth continue to grow throughout the horse's life. As a horse chews, the



Veterinarian Ronald N. Stuber, Penn Paddock Equine Center, Annaville, illustrates the use of the chisel on the skull.

teeth wear on the inside of the top teeth and the outside of the bottom teeth. Since the edges do not get worn off, the teeth can develop points that can grow past the opposing tooth and into the mouth lining or cheek. The problem can be aggravated by misalignment of the jaws because of individual conformation.

These sharp edges are removed by rubbing them with a rasp or file, called a float. Equine reactions may vary from a resigned submission to indignant resistance, or, like some humans, even violence. "The biggest problem is usually me working on them," says Dr. Stuber. In cases of horses who have never had their teeth floated, his hands often come out of the patient's mouth covered with deep scratches from the sharp points on the teeth.

"A lot of horses are very good about it. On others we may use a twitch or a tranquilizer but many need neither. It helps to know the horse and have the horse know you." Proper restraint also cuts the time involved with treatment.

One vital instrument Dr. Stuber uses is a speculum, consisting of two bite plates for the horse's incisors to rest on and a strap to go around the patient's head. The speculum can be fixed in different degrees of openness, enabling the dentist to better see into the mouth.

"I like to totally examine the mouth before I begin. I look for caps, growths or polyps, broken or abscessed teeth. I can put a flashlight in there and look around.

"If a tooth needs to be extracted or chiseled, I can see it." He adds since the last molar and the jaw are very close, practitioners who do not use a speculum can easily overlook problems involving the last molar. "And it's not fair to the horse or to the owner not to get that



This is a speculum Stuber uses in his examinations.

back molar."

Despite the necessity for regular horse check-ups, floating a horse's teeth is not a favorite job among veterinarians. "I grew up with it," says Dr. Stuber. "If you are used to climbing a mountain, then climbing a mountain isn't hard. This isn't the easiest thing in the world—it takes muscle power and technique. You can't learn it overnight."

He adds to be a horse dentist you don't need to be a vet but in some states you need to be approved by a vet. "Some states are more finicky than others. In certain states only veterinarians are supposed to do teeth at the race tracks." The advantage of having a veterinarian float your horse's teeth is the vet may spot other problems your horse may have.

He also says you can tell the exact age of a horse during the first nine years of its life. Once the

horse is over ten, you can estimate and still get pretty close. A horse in the ten-and-over age group is referred to as a smooth-mouth because the cups are worn off the incisors.

"When horse trading was big business, unscrupulous dealers would mark the incisors to create a false cup and make the horse look younger." This practice, called bishoping the teeth, could fool the novice buyer but more experienced horsemen also take into account tooth angle and shape when determining age.

Dr. Stuber says a horse over 30 is living on borrowed time. The teeth are quite angled and often the horse has difficulty eating. Older horses are also more prone to periodontal disease and sinus trouble because the roots of the teeth extend up into the sinus area.

"It takes work to keep those teeth right. It's not a question of changing toothpaste."

City boy becomes a horse dentist

ANNVILLE — "I was fortunate when it comes to horse dentistry. There used to be a blacksmith and horse dentist named Red Creswell in New Holland. When I was a kid, Red used to do all our horses. I got a lot of good pointers from Red."

Dr. Ronald Neal Stuber, was born and raised in Reading, a city boy with an enthusiasm for horses. He spent several years showing open jumpers in the days when show ring rivalries were intense but competitors were still good friends when the classes were over.

His father wanted him to become a lawyer but Ron's prelaw grades were neglected as he was still riding his jumpers. Matters came to a head during his third year of college when finals were scheduled for the same week as the prestigious Devon Horse Show, where Ron was a competitor.

For awhile he worked as a farmhand, fixing fence and mucking stalls for Dr. Fred Thomson in Robesonia. "He knew I wasn't happy at school and he recommended prevet. That turned my whole educational outlook around."

Stuber was graduated from veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania in 1967. "From day one I was busy," he remarks. Soon he had almost all of the horse practice in the Berks County area.

Today his veterinary facility, Penn Paddock Equine Center, is located on a hilltop outside of Annaville. The complex houses a laboratory, examination room, operating room and recovery rooms, numerous box stalls, foaling stalls, offices, a tack room and an indoor exercise area. Sue and Ron Stuber's home is under the same roof as the facility and constructed so an observer in the house can monitor a horse in the recovery room or in a foaling stall. Twelve large paddocks surround the complex.

"We are here to provide a 24-hour emergency hospital service, either medical or surgical. Time is of the essence in critical surgical practice. That can mean the difference in the life or death of a horse."

"If we can't treat it or take care of it I guarantee we will send the horse to someone who can."



Ron shows how he uses the speculum on a horse patient.



Assisted by his wife Sue, Ron begins to float his patient's teeth