



The Impending Equine Health Care Crisis

The supply of equine veterinarians is diminishing rapidly. How can horse owners help?

Posted by Emma Read, DVM, MVSc, Dipl. ACVS | Sep 15, 2022 | Article, Equine Care Professions, Horse Care, Vet and Professional, Veterinary Practice, Veterinary Students, Veterinary Technicians, Welfare and Industry, Working With a Veterinarian



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Many veterinary practices currently have too few practitioners to serve their clients. | Courtesy Dr. Ann Lynch

A crisis is brewing for your horse. This growing threat has been largely silent but is now creating alarm in many parts of the United States. All indicators show the situation worsening, with the potential to impact all horses. What is this existential threat? The rapidly diminishing supply of equine veterinarians.

At this moment many veterinary practices have too few practitioners to serve their clients, leaving horses in need of health care and equine veterinarians stretched beyond their capabilities. Many of you have already been affected, either by waiting longer for an appointment or not having access to after-hours services.

In 2021 the American Veterinary Medical Association reported that of 3,311 U.S. veterinary school graduates, 46 (1.4%) entered equine private practice at graduation and another 97 (2.9%) entered equine internships. The survey revealed that within five years, 50% of these young veterinarians leave the field. That isn't a typo; 50% really do leave equine veterinary medicine after five years for small animal practice or quit veterinary medicine altogether.

AAEP Creates Commission to Alleviate Equine Veterinarian Shortage

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The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) has formed the Commission on Equine Veterinary Sustainability to develop strategies to retain and recruit more veterinarians to equine practice.

Many areas of the United States and beyond currently face a shortage of equine practitioners to provide veterinary care to horses and other equids. This equine welfare issue will further intensify without action to address the diminishing number of equine veterinarians.

The Commission will be led by AAEP-member volunteers with work focused in five key areas: compensation, strategies for effective emergency coverage, veterinary practice culture, internships, and supporting the growth and development of the equine veterinary student.

“The equine veterinary profession is in crisis,” said AAEP President Dr. Emma Read. “In order to transform equine practice, we must address the pain points which are driving exceptional horse doctors away. Without change, future veterinary care for our nation’s horses will be greatly jeopardized.”

According to AAEP data, approximately 1.3% of new veterinary graduates enter equine practice directly each year, and another 4.5% pursue further training in equine internship positions. Within five years, however, 50% of all these veterinarians leave for small animal practice or quit veterinary medicine altogether. The primary reasons are burnout due to the personal demands of the profession and personal struggle due to the lower starting salaries for equine practice when compared to companion animal practice. Many new veterinarians begin their career with more than \$200,000 in student loan debt.

While developing solutions to the five key factors affecting sustainability of equine practice, the Commission will ensure that the needs of one- and two-doctor practices are carefully considered. Approximately 50% of AAEP members operate practices of this size. Outreach to horse owners and equine industry partners will create expanded awareness and yield additional perspective.

“Every person in the profession has a role to play in its transformation,” added Dr. Read. “This is one of the largest initiatives ever undertaken by the AAEP and we look forward to collaborating with equine veterinarians and those who help support them in all facets of practice to change the numbers.”

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Driving this exodus are the personal demands and lower starting salaries of equine practice. In 2022 the mean reported starting salary for small animal practitioners was \$110,000, plus a four-day work week and no emergency duty. A new equine practitioner reportedly makes a third to a half less, for a longer work week with on-call hours. Many new graduates carry more than \$200,000 in student loan debt, making a job with low pay often unthinkable, no matter how much they desire to become a horse doctor.

Emergency coverage is another incredibly challenging aspect of equine practice. Unlike in small animal medicine, few emergency clinics exist. It is each equine veterinarian's responsibility to ensure emergency care for clients. For many practitioners, their job is 24/7. This takes its toll on the veterinarian's mental and physical health and their families. Many choose to leave the job for a healthier lifestyle.

The solution is complex and will require a collaborative effort unprecedented in equine circles. The American Association of Equine Practitioners is working within the profession to transform compensation, emergency coverage, and practice culture.

The Change Ahead: Where Are All These New Veterinarians Going To Come From? by Natalie Voss|06.28.2022|9:49pm

As the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority fights multiple lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of the new organization, it remains to be seen when, whether, and how it will implement new rules. It has been made clear by those working for the Authority so far that it will not be a night-to-day change between June 30 and July 2, 2022, especially since the Anti-Doping and Medication Control Program will not go into effect until Jan. 1, 2023. There will also be a phase-in process for its Racetrack Safety Program, which in many ways will seek to codify best practices suggested by the NTRA's Safety and Integrity Alliance and the Association of Racing Commissioners International.

Assuming the Authority is able to bring about this change, there are a few jurisdictions and racetracks that will be in for a rude awakening. In this series, we take a look at where American racing stands now with key parts of the new regulations. What do we know about the history behind new rules? How have some states fared after implementing safety rules voluntarily? What has stopped some jurisdictions from adopting these changes on their own?

One of the most critical elements of racing safety may be the pre-race veterinary examination. Some of the recent changes in medication regulation in key racing states have been based around keeping horses as honest as possible, not just for their race but for their morning soundness exam to reduce the risk of injury. The procedure provides an opportunity for veterinarians to give extra scrutiny to horses whose race or workout records indicate they may be high risk, and to compare notes to previous exams to pick up on any early warnings of a condition that could lead to injury.

But while regulations in some states grant veterinarians the opportunity to do pre-race examinations on every entry, not all of them are doing that – and that's a problem, because **as of July 2, the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority will require it.**

For some time now, the American Association of Equine Practitioners has sounded the alarm about an impending shortage of equine veterinarians. According to racing regulators, the crisis has arrived.

Ismael “Izzy” Trejo, executive director of the New Mexico Racing Commission, says that while state regulation allows regulatory veterinarians to screen all horses before races, only about 20 to 30 percent of runners in the state are actually seeing a veterinarian in the morning before they run.

“We're not where we should be in regards to pre-race exams in the state of New Mexico,” said Trejo.

Trejo said the state has one vet on contract and another on staff to cover 206 race days across overlapping race meets. They work with stewards to create a high risk list based on past performances and regulatory data, and those are the horses selected for screening. The exam itself is thorough, with palpation and flexion required as well as watching horses in motion. There is veterinary oversight in the paddock and during the post parade, as there are in most places, in case a horse warms up awkwardly or has a profound enough lameness to show up during saddling. But, Trejo admits, it's not ideal – and the state is paying a lot for a less-than-ideal situation.

“It costs the agency upwards of \$1,000 a day [for the contract worker],” said Trejo of the rate the state is paying for veterinarians currently. “It's a struggle to survive. We're all fighting for veterinarians.”

(Perhaps oddly, Trejo pointed out, New Mexico's fatality rate has varied independently of this vet shortage, with some meets coming in well below the national average. Last year, Zia Park's meet had 1.28 fatalities per 1,000 starts and the Downs at Albuquerque had 1.03 per 1,000, notably below the 1.39 national average.)

New Mexico isn't alone in its struggles; Arizona has been examining only a portion of horses pre-race because its commission has been understaffed. Delaware typically starts its summer with three state vets and a few alternates in case one should call in sick. This year, Delaware Park started the season with two and no back-ups. Pre-race exams have continued as usual there, but the state had to change a regulation to allow a veterinary technician to draw blood in the test barn – a job that had previously been done by a vet.

Commissions aren't the only ones who can't find equine veterinarians to work for them; some race meets are short on private practitioners, too. Trejo said he believes the most recent 17-day Sunray Park meet had just one or two private practitioners on site to care for 700 to 800 horses, though others like the Ruidoso meet are better-staffed. Delaware regulators had to pass an emergency rule change allowing Lasix to be administered by private practitioners this season after the veterinary practice that normally gives third-party Lasix informed the state it didn't have enough staff to do it.

The number of vets in equine practice has been dwindling in recent years. A study from the American Veterinary Medical Association found only 1 percent of veterinary students plan to go into equine practice, down from 4 percent in the mid-2000s. Studies have also shown that five years after graduating veterinary school, half of new equine vets will have switched fields.

Anyone with horses knows the hours caring for them are long, unpredictable, and filled with risk of injury. Equine vets often get paid significantly less than small animal vets, which is a tough pill to swallow for those starting their careers with an average of over \$188,000 in debt. A 2020 survey of vet school graduates found that those accepting jobs in equine practices were reporting starting salaries averaging \$56,000, while those in small animal were reporting starting salaries of \$93,000.

“They just graduated; maybe they're looking at getting married, maybe having children and they're saying, 'Wow. I've got to make the right choice – the financially responsible choice,’” said Dr. Amy Grice, veterinary business consultant.

And, because there are so few of them, the equine vets who remain in practice are being stretched thinner and thinner. Veterinary technicians are getting hard to find too, leaving the vets who have continued working with even more to do.

The racing sphere can be an especially tough place to work. As race meets rotate between tracks or states, regulatory and private veterinarians alike have to travel with them. While equine veterinarians in other businesses charge for examinations and diagnoses, many racing vets bill only for treatments, sometimes setting up the expectation they'll act as dispensers more than expert practitioners.

What HISA will do: On July 2, all horses will be required to pass a veterinary exam pre-race.

States that have signed regulatory agreements with HISA will have their veterinarians enforce the rules that go into effect July 2. For states where there is no agreement in place, HISA will have to send its own set of officials. Many wonder if that means HISA will soon be hiring more equine vets – and whether they're going to offer more competitive compensation than states can.

Fees for any additional veterinarians hired by HISA will be passed on to racetracks.

Kentucky Horse Racing Commission equine medical director Dr. Bruce Howard said that his team is prepared to comply with HISA's pre-race exam requirements, which are already the standard practice. Howard said the KHRC's team has not faced the same staff shortage that other jurisdictions have, and the private practitioner population is keeping up with existing needs.

"We've had – I wouldn't say trouble finding veterinarians, but it's a constant thing, where just when we think we have enough staff, someone may retire," said Howard. "Right now we're doing very well.

"When I'm talking to someone about a potential hire, I guess we approach things just a little bit different than a private practitioner. I can stress some of our benefits are that there's no after-hours on-call time, there's no emergency call. I was in private practice so I know how challenging that can be. We can guarantee they'll have a certain number of days off, so we can do a little bit better than private practice that way."

But Kentucky is probably the exception rather than the rule. In New Mexico, Trejo said the veterinarian who works for the state came out of retirement to do so, and he knows of other jurisdictions that have also coaxed vets back to work to cover short meets. He knows that won't be an option forever.

Since New Mexico's racing commission did not agree to pay HISA's bill to the state, the responsibility of hiring extra personnel will fall on the racetrack. Trejo expects the racetrack veterinarian and state vets can work together to achieve the requirements of the Authority since there's a healthy mix between Thoroughbreds and other breeds, and HISA only applies to Thoroughbred racehorses.

"We've got to work as a team because we don't have a lot of resources here in New Mexico," he said. "We'll certainly work with the racetracks to fulfill the requirements of HISA. If it's 100 percent for Thoroughbreds, we could probably achieve that pretty easily, because that's probably between three and five races a day.

No one seems sure how the upcoming HISA implementation will impact the vet shortage, but Grice, the veterinary business consultant, said the status quo is going to have to change throughout the equine industry, HISA or no HISA.

Why One Veterinarian Says There May Soon Be A Shortage Of Equine Practitioners — And How You Can Help

by Natalie Voss|11.25.2021|4:58pm

It's no secret that employers across all industries are hard-pressed for help right now. **Dr. Debbie Spike-Pierce, president and CEO of Rood + Riddle Equine Hospital, worries that soon equine veterinarians won't just have a tough time finding people to work for them – their clients may have a tough time finding someone to treat their horse.**

Spike-Pierce presented some unsettling statistics at the clinic's annual client education seminar last month and shared her thoughts on why equine practice is in particular trouble. **She cited a study by the American Veterinary Medical Association that found only about 1 percent of veterinary students are planning to go into equine practice – down from 4 percent in the mid-2000s. In the population of existing veterinarians, equine vets make up 5.6 percent of the total. Spike-Pierce also said that within five years post-graduate, 50 percent of equine veterinarians will leave equine practice.**

There are lots of reasons for this, but they all boil down to burnout. Spike-Pierce said that veterinarians surveyed by the American Association for Equine Practitioners (AAEP) report their physical health as pretty good – impressive, considering how physical their jobs often are. They self-reported their mental health as much less favorable, with 18% of male equine veterinarians classifying their mental health as fair to poor, and 25% of female equine veterinarians saying the same.

The Paulick Report ran an open letter from Dr. Rebecca Mears about the mental health of veterinarians earlier this year, specifically focusing on the “Not One More Vet” or NOMV movement aimed at preventing veterinary suicide.

As Mears explained, recent veterinary school graduates begin their careers under a mountain of debt, often taking low-paying jobs in their first years out of school as they work to get established. Those who go into mobile practice for themselves (like many equine veterinarians) have even greater start-up debt.

Veterinary practices of all sorts have taken to social media in recent months, expressing that they are dealing with shorter tempers than normal from clients, combined with smaller staffs to help manage nursing care and caseloads. Social media has also enabled a dissatisfied client to put a practice on blast, whether or not their criticisms feel true or fair to the veterinarian. After a long day dealing with sick animals and angst-ridden clients, finding a negative review on social media can often feel like the last straw.

Equine practice can be even more demanding, since as Spike-Pierce points out, it doesn't have set hours the way a dog or cat clinic would.

“We are seeing these same issues in equine practice as we are seeing in general veterinary practice, but we're also seeing people leave equine practice and go to small animal practice,” said Spike-Pierce.

Oftentimes, she said she hears people dismiss these issues by saying that equine practice is “a lifestyle” – which she agrees is true.

“It is a lifestyle,” she said. “Actually it's one I pretty much enjoyed. What I loved about equine practice was feeling like I could take my kids with me. I went on calls with my dad growing up. The equine industry as a whole is very open to having kids be there. Oftentimes I think the reason we're working with horses is because we were there when our parents were.”

But not everyone wants to buy into having that round-the-clock lifestyle for most of their lives, and telling young veterinarians that they should work seven days a week or get out of the business seems to result in many choosing the latter. Spike-Pierce said the culture around horses is your job is 24/7 because horses need care 24/7 – but that care doesn't always have to come from the same person.

One reason equine veterinarians may make the switch to small animal practice is that dog and cat clinics often share emergency duty, or allow clinicians to work a smaller number of longer days each week so they get some predictable off time. Spike-Pierce said there's some degree of client education involved in a set-up like that for horse veterinarians — clients need to know who's on duty for after-hours calls on a particular night, or they need to be ok with having their call forwarded to a different doctor sometimes. She has seen some smaller practices experiment with this, with some success.

“Our younger veterinarians are asking for time,” she said. “They want to have time away from work, but they're able and willing to work extra hard when they are working. They want that separation.”

Splitting up duties, especially emergency duties, by geographic region can be a game changer for veterinarians' stress levels, too — and it can reduce the wait for a client who's dealing with an animal in distress.

“If you all have ideas, that's welcome,” Spike-Pierce told the audience. “It's something we're going to need to address in the future to be able to continue to serve animals.

“If you look at the numbers, it just doesn't work if it continues on the same trend. So please, thank your veterinarian, and please work with them to give them the time they need.”