



Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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Horse Dentistry with a Human Dentist's Perspective

Letter: "Lately I have read a great deal about horse dentistry in a number of different horse magazines both from the States and Canada. I have been a supporter since a dentist saved my 21 year old horse's life when his front teeth grew so long that the back teeth could no longer grind food. However, it wasn't until I went to my (human) dentist, for *my* annual check-up, that I felt the need to write you a letter of support, and tell you why."

"During *my* dental exam, I asked my dentist if he had heard about dentistry performed on horses. Being a horse hobbyist himself he took the opportunity to give me an ear full of his views on horse dentistry and the benefits. I'm happy to report, everything he listed was up the same alley you and your colleagues promote. Although, I became distressed when he related the following story about his neighbor."

"Two years ago, (I'll call her) Joyce called a horse dentist to work on (and fix) her dressage horse when the horse seemingly was having problems turning to the left. At the time, she was advised by the horse dentist to have her horse re-checked every year *'to keep his teeth in proper working order'*. Instead, time slipped away, horse shows came and went; now Joyce was having behavior problems with her horse serious enough to effect her show scores. Wanting to show right away, but unable to get the horse dentist to come to her barn upon demand; she decided to take the horse to her veterinarian *'to fix the problem'*. However, instead of addressing her horse's teeth, he told her the teeth were fine and suggested (and sold her) a specific supplement for the ill mannered behavior. When Joyce told him about the horse dentist she used two years earlier, his procedures, recommendations and what he did to fix the problem, he told her dentistry was merely an elaborate scam and way over-rated."

"I was outraged to hear this and intended to call Joyce right away. My (human) dentist assured me, he'd informed her that horse dentistry was indeed a viable industry, basing his personal conviction on educated data. He also suggested she do her homework, as all good horse owners should when entrusting our animals to a professional; check references, identify education levels, years in business, etc."

"Personally, I schedule time, once a year to have the horse dentist visit our ranch. I invite my neighbors, friends and riding associates to join me in attending to our horse's teeth. It has almost become a time to look forward to, getting together has become quite the social event. And in doing so, I and those attending have personally witnessed a large number of horse's teeth in absolutely terrible shape, some with serious problems. We've watched as each horse, worked on by the horse dentist, find relief. We also observed the benefits they received, long after the dentist has gone, not only with respects to the horse's health and condition but more importantly the riding issues."

"I'd heard of a few veterinarians doing foolish things in an effort to put a dent in the horse dentistry industry (raising an eyebrow) but this is out and out maliciousness. I want you to know that there will always be those of us in the horse industry (and human dentistry field alike) that realize the benefits you offer and will take a stand against this kind of ignorance."

Response: When I began doing equine dentistry I never imagined I would get fan mail.

First, for the most part, "we" only go to the dentist when "we" have a problem or pain. Not many of "us" schedule an annual dental check-up let alone keep it. Therefore, why should we take our horses to see the dentist unless he had some kind of problem or pain? The truth of the matter is, having your horse's teeth routinely looked after is no more than good maintenance practice for our equine partners. Since horse's teeth continue to erupt (grow), as with farrier work, keeping on top of a problem is better than chasing it, in an attempt to fix it.

As a general rule, horses between the ages of two and five years old need to be seen every six months since they are losing baby teeth and replacing them with adult teeth. If they don't fall out at the proper time, teeth that could cause a life time of problems can quickly be dealt with. Horses over the age of five need to be seen once a year to remove sharp points, reduce incisors and address one sided chewing, hooks, ramps, etc.

Second, chances are your horse does have a problem caused by pain.

If he,

- a) has trouble eating;
- b) is difficult to catch, bit, bridle or halter;
- c) tosses his head, gapes his mouth, or tries to mouth the shank on the bit when he is bridled; or
- d) refuses to stay collected, rounded or balanced and sometimes roots the reins out of your hand. (Just to name a few.)

The problem is your horse can't tell you what or where it hurts . . . but he is telling you it hurts.

Funny thing, all of the paraphernalia we hang on our horse's head such as tie-downs, cavesons, or correction bits won't make your horse's pain go away. We as horse owners, through a lack of understanding, are notorious for putting bandages on the symptoms. Instead, I suggest "we" fix the problem. Thank you for your support and remember, all undesirable actions are compensatory to any point of pain and attributes to a horse's balance. If you are experiencing any of these undesirable behaviors while riding your horse, have a certified equine dentist take a look and get the answer '*straight from your horse's mouth*'.

If you have a question about your horse's teeth and how they might relate to his health or performance call (306) 266-2060 or e-mail your question to mackequine@sasktel.net.