Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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Are You Settling?

As a certified equine dentist I go to great lengths to educate horse owners of not only the benefits of an annual equine dental care program but to express the importance of seeking out a ***certified*** professional as well.

CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS:

A ***certified*** equine dentist is required to have a minimum of 500 supervised hours of dental experience. They are then required to have an additional 1200 hours (minimum) of practical experience before they can apply for certification. This is on top of the many

I have recently had several new clients that have had previous dental work performed, and have found mouths subjected to dental disasters ranging from aggressive improper reductions to partial job completions. Each of which immediately impaired the animal's performance and eventual health condition. This significant industry impact is serious enough to express ***caution*** to all horse owners across the country. I'm finding that the more aware horse owners become to the benefits of horse dentistry, the more horse owners are finding themselves in the middle of the difficult pursuit of seeking out a certified equine dental professional. Unfortunately, weather they know it or not, many are settling for someone with little experience in the field of horse dentistry. Let me give you a few examples to help explain my point of concern.

Case #1: I was called to a breeding facility to evaluate a seventeen year old pregnant mare, with a foal at side. She was underweight and had lost a significant amount of weight since she had foaled. The owners became concerned about her deteriorating condition and wondered if she would survive the upcoming winter months. The owners had a local practitioner look at the mare once the mare's condition became a concern. After deworming failed to produce improvement, the practitioner deduced it was her teeth. He floated her back teeth, removing the natural table angle on the first three molars and left the back three molars untouched. The fourth tooth back on the mare's upper right side was protruding almost an inch longer than it should and wasn't addressed nor were her incisors. The owners were told to return in six months for a follow-up appointment at which time they again ground away tooth off the first three back teeth and left the rest of the mouth unattended. By the time I was called to the farm, the mare had dropped enough weight you could see her entire skeletal structure. My preliminary exam found not only a horse that was unable to

chew her food but the inside of the mare's cheeks were chewed into hamburger (since the front three molars were so much shorter that the back three teeth, the soft tissue of the cheeks were being inadvertently pulled between her teeth with every bit of food she chewed).

This past summer, across the country I have found an increasing number of cases with horse's teeth aggressively floated on the bottom molar tables with the back one or even two teeth untouched. The incisors and the upper molar tables are virtually left untouched as well. This leaves the horse with too few teeth left to chew his food. The back teeth and incisors are left holding the mouth in the same place as it was before the practitioner started floating, although the horse is left with an insufficient grinding surface to chew with. It is only after a number of months pass of rapidly diminishing health that I get a call to find and attempt to fix the problem.

I am finding practitioners before me are using only one instrument to attempt to float the entire mouth. The instrument is either too large to treat the entire molar arcade or the practitioner is not proficient enough to perform a proper job. (The throat narrows as you get to the back; numerous different float designs, shapes and sizes are needed to complete the job properly.)

Case #2: In one area of the Province numerous horses had been floated, a bit seat put in and the incisors untouched. The float was common (the sharp edges were removed from the outside of the top teeth) generally known as a basic float. However, this practitioner was putting in bit seats at a different angle than the rest of the molar arcade. When the bit seats were short it didn't impede grinding. Although, as the teeth in these horses grew out, the first tooth prevented the horse's jaw from moving side to side properly. As the horses would attempt to chew, their jaw would lift apart and away from the other five teeth of the molar arcade. These remaining five teeth were then allowed to grow and meet with the chewing surface of first tooth's angle (flat). (Leaving the molar arcade flat causes the horse to begin pounding up and down instead of from side to side.) When I was called to the area, I found varying degrees of developing "flat" molar tables as well as varying degrees of compromised horse's health and periodontal disease caused by un-natural up and down chewing. The only common link was the improperly installed bit seats.

Case #3: I received a call from a concerned reader that was told her horse had an abscess on the jaw of her five year old gelding. She was told they needed to remove the tooth and would cost her $2500. A second opinion quoted $1500. When I had the opportunity to look at her gelding I found a horse that merely retained a baby tooth and removed it for $5.

This past year I am finding a large number of practitioners removing perfectly healthy teeth under the auspice of an abscess concern. Without the proper training, individuals are unaware that the lump is merely a dental cyst caused by an adult tooth growing to push the baby tooth off. As an adult tooth matures, it recesses when it reaches the underside of the baby tooth, gets a firm footing on the jaw and pushes up, removing the baby tooth. The lump on the jaw (or top of the skull) is due to the softness of the young horse's bones and will recede over time as the adult tooth grows into place.

The unfortunate thing is that once a horse's tooth is removed (especially in their younger years) that horse will become a high maintenance dental patient. Since a horse's teeth continue to grow throughout the horses life the empty space will be filled by the tooth on the opposing side. If the owner does not attend to the tooth at least every three to six months, the animal's health could eventually be compromised and death may result. Realignment of the entire arcade will also result from tooth removal. As in humans, when a tooth is removed, pressure is released and the teeth next to it will begin to move into its stead. This is more critical in horses than in humans because

of the material a horse's teeth are made of is not all hard enamel. When horse's teeth realign, hard surfaces meet with a soft surfaces and a more serious grinding problem starts to unfold. The rule of thumb is — it is very, very rare that young horses will have an abscessed tooth and removing permanent teeth at any age should only be removed after a careful qualified consideration.

As horse owners we have a responsibility to look after the care and welfare of our equine partners. It is my hope that through this column, (especially this article) can give you the knowledge to ask the right questions and avoid suffering through similar tragic situations as in case #1, #2 or #3. Keep in mind, we as horse owners merely suffer financially. It is the horses we have taken upon ourselves to care for that truly suffer when subjected to this kind of ignorance.

If you have any questions about the kind of horse dentistry you have had performed on 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.