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A Bad Experience Encourages Concern

Question: *My husband accuses me of subscribing to almost every horse magazine published in North America, and may be right. Although, over the last couple years I have noticed an increased awareness of horse dentistry, in the publications I subscribe to and the relationship it has to my horses health and their performance. I recently took my horses in for their annual vet check. After the regular stuff was done I began to inquire about the dental check up I had been reading about. My vet referred me to an equine dental specialist telling me that dentists have the proper equipment and specific education necessary for performing dentistry. He was very explicit about choosing a "certified" horse dentist and related some disturbing stories of some of his clients that weren't so particular. He told me he had researched studying horse dentistry for his own practice and realized the large number of hours and extra equipment required for certifying would take him away from his practice and be impractical at this time. He then showed me a circular grinder that he purchased years ago for his veterinary practice and said after using it a few times, realized he needed to leave dentistry to the dentists as they leave veterinary work to him. He assured me that dentistry for horses was very important and annual check ups would indeed extend the quality of health of my horses as well as improve my horses ability to perform. I respect my veterinarians opinion very much, his comments even paralleled the articles, I re-read (on horse dentistry specific) when I got home. While I feel that I am informed as a horse owner, I am finding it difficult to locate a horse dentist "specific" let alone one that is "certified" in Canada and in my area. Worse yet, one of my best friends and riding partners took their horse into someone that said they did horse dentistry shortly after she read an article in a popular horse magazine. He happened to be a veterinarian located in a nearby community. After she brought her horse home it seemed to be losing weight rapidly, her horse wasn't interested in eating anymore. 150+ lbs and two weeks later she was forced to find a "certified" horse dentist that had to travel an extensive distance in order to get to her farm. When he arrived, she saw for herself what was wrong. A circular grinder, (one I'm sure like the one my veterinarian showed me) took off so much tooth that her horse's teeth didn't touch anymore. And worse yet, the showed her a diagram of how important the angel was in the back of her horse's mouth but now her horse was floated flat. She was instructed to prepare a meal of what the dentist called a pre-chop mixture of alfalfa and oats, two times a day. Even though he is gaining weight she suppose to keep up with the food mixtures until her horses teeth supposedly grow out and meet in the middle again. She also has to have her horse see the dentist more often to what she described as double check the progress, and making sure the teeth are growing correctly. Which seems to me to be more than necessary, I didn't think horse's teeth grew that fast. I understand that 'people dentists' are not the same as 'people doctors', therefore I can grasp the concept of 'horse dentistry' as apposed to 'veterinary work' but how do I as a horse owner prevent this from happening to one of my horses? I also read an article that reported a confusing controversy between veterinarians and what the article referred to as "Lay Dentists". If this dentist wasn't available and willing to travel to her farm, she would have lost him for sure. Can you offer some clarification to a a very concerned and nervous horse owner in Regina, Saskatchewan.*

Dear concerned horse owner in Regina. Your letter was very specific and easier for me to rewrite than to merely comment on, so with your permission I have provided it for others to read. Your homework serves you well. Horse dentistry is indeed a complex field of study that directly impacts horse health and performance and does take many hours of education and hands on experience before producing competence. The art of horse dentistry has been around for over 180 years and when the buggy was our only source of transportation there were as many horse dentists as veterinarians. (1819 is the earliest documented dental instruments manufactured by Arnold and Sons in England) Dentistry went by the way side as did the buggy when Ford made and the Model-A affordable to the average American worker. It wasn't until pleasure riding became vogue, that floating was found to be an answer to horse behavior problems, although in reality it was only a partial fix since it merely brushed off the sharp edges on the cheek side of the back teeth. About 40 years ago the first horse dentistry school was organized in the United States. There is currently five schools world wide and is currently growing world wide momentum. I think I can safely say that most of the top performance horses competing in the world today do so with what dentistry calls Equilibration or a full float and balance. There is indeed enough horses in the North America as well as concerned horse owner to provide a good living for everyone.

The school I attended requires certified horse dentists to have a minimum of 500 hours working in the horses mouth in addition to all the book work and testing procedures. As your veterinarian noted, there are a number of instruments required to properly complete a dental equilibration and without them can cause serious damage to the horses health. Unfortunately for your friend there are currently some practicing horse dentistry with a minimum of 2 to 6 hours of book study covering the horses mouth and using only one "do-it-all" instrument. Whereas I am not interested in talking against any one person I do realize that horse dentistry articles cause confusion on behalf of the horse owner if the owner is then unable to find a qualified and certified horse dentist. However, continuing to educate the general public of dental importance will bring an industry together that will have minimum standards and accountability. But until then, horse owners must continue to make an effort to educate themselves then seek out specialists that can perform to their expected standard. I go to great lengths in my dental practice to show my clients what is going on in their horse's mouth and why their horse is performing the way they are or even why they are seeming to be "hard keepers". I am sold on the power of knowledge and work hard to continually educate all of my clients so they can make educated choices. I encourage my clients to keep annual follow-ups if not by me, by another certified equine dentist since maintenance is the key to continued health and performance.

It is difficult to Monday morning quarterback any diagnosis. But what you describe, I have seen in a variety of degrees of severity. Let me first explain the life of a horse's tooth in order to provide an understanding of what happens if we take too much tooth off at any one time. A horse's tooth is five inches long at five years old and works it's way out, throughout the horse's life. For the most part, when a horse's teeth are gone, he then expires unless pre-chopped feed is available for him to consume. A horse grinds off small particles of tooth (from the molar tables) with every bit of food he chews and grinds off small particles of tooth (from his incisors) when he nips grass. As the teeth grind against each other (top teeth against the bottom teeth) they very slowly work out of the sockets. As dentists, we check annually to make sure teeth are grinding away correctly. Even chewing on one side exclusively (caused by a kick, sliver in his cheek or gums) can cause future problems. If we find a situation as you've described, grinding too much tooth off, leaving a gap or space between the top and bottom teeth. Teeth that don't touch will then grow out at a faster rate until they again meet in the middle. If the entire molar table is aggressively taken down, as a dentist, it is important to keep an eye on the growth rate of the entire molar table to make sure all the teeth meet in the middle at the same time. Not knowing the age of your friend's horse or the severity of the situation I must reserve comment on the return requirements but it sounds like he is on track for the described condition. If your friend's dentist doesn't take necessary concern needed to find normal again, years ground away from her horse's teeth will be the least of her problems. Abnormal growth can cause a number of future health complications. Horse owners, world wide are taking on the fight for the "Right To Choose" because of cases like you've described. I would encourage every horse owner to ask questions of your horse health care workers just like they do with their personal health care. I trust this clears up some of the questions you expressed.

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.