

POSITIVE VETERINARY CARE FOR EQUINE CLINICS

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PHOTO BY LAUREN FRASER

Canadian veterinarians take an oath to relieve suffering and enhance the welfare of animals in their care. But good welfare isn't just the absence of ill health; instead, it's both physical and behavioural health playing an integral role in determining welfare states.

Veterinarians have opportunities to enhance the behavioural health of patients, such as by advising clients about behavioural conditions with medical origins. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) recently put out a position statement on how veterinarians can further enhance behavioural health, through positive veterinary care. The organization defined positive veterinary care as '...methods of veterinary practice that promote calm emotions for patients of all species and their caregivers by encouraging awareness of the patient's experience throughout the visit.'

For equine veterinarians, such approaches during veterinary care can not only enhance the horse's experience, but can also provide numerous benefits to veterinary staff and clients.

BENEFITS TO EQUINE PATIENTS

Veterinarians who are able to recognize and respond appropriately to arousal levels and affective states can offer numerous benefits to equine patients. Calm handling can increase patient compliance with procedures, even those which are mildly aversive. For young or naïve horses, how they are handled during exams or procedures can set the stage for how they will behave under similar circumstances in the future. Whether on their home turf, or in a veterinary clinic, horses are continually learning via operant and classical conditioning. Operant conditioning results in an increase or decrease of a target behaviour, depending on whether the consequences that follow that behaviour are desirable or undesirable.

Simultaneously, associations about stimuli are created involuntarily through the process of classical conditioning. For example, in as little as one learning trial, the initially neutral appearance of a veterinarian can predict that something feared follows. In short order, the horse may begin to display fear as soon as the veterinarian comes in sight, without anything else occurring. Such associations can profoundly affect a horse's behaviour—as any veterinarian who has dealt with a needle-phobic horse can attest. Fortunately, this process can also work to positive effect, where the sight of the veterinarian predicts pleasant things are about to occur.

Positive veterinary care focuses on ensuring that the experience of being handled and treated is as pleasant as possible for the horse, and that desirable consequences occur for the horse following wanted behaviour. This maximizes the likelihood of the horse behaving in a desired way, at the time of the exam and on future occasions. Working with horses in such a manner encourages lower states of arousal and positive affective states. It also conveys physiological benefits, such as decreased cortisol production and decreased risk of complications during sedation or anesthesia.

BENEFITS TO THE VETERINARY STAFF AND PRACTICE

Positive veterinary care benefits both veterinary staff and the practice itself. Horses who are less stressed are more compliant, making a veterinarian's workday

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Left: Recognizing subtle signs of anxiety or fear early can prevent fear-based behaviours from escalating (photo by Jayme Ellis); bottom left: Cord trailer loading (photo by David Taylor); bottom right: Using systematic desensitization to work with a horse with ear shyness (photo by Lauren Fraser).

more efficient. Calm horses are safer to handle for all staff and are less likely to injure themselves while in a clinic's care. Clients also appreciate seeing their horses handled in ways that minimize stress and fear, word of mouth about a clinic's practices is powerful advertising—for better or worse. Equine clinics who commit to practising positive veterinary care could be viewed as industry leaders.

BENEFITS TO THE CLIENT

Positive veterinary care also benefits the client, resulting in increased client satisfaction that the horse's emotional needs are being considered. In a survey on what clients value most in a veterinarian, kindness ranked number one, even over competency. How a client's animal is treated is also valued, with clients ranking *lack of concern and compassion or roughness and brutality* with their animal high on a complaint list. Another benefit of positive veterinary care is that horses that have learned that procedures or treatments are nothing to fear are more likely to be compliant when medicated by clients at home.

EXAMPLES OF LOW-STRESS HANDLING IN EQUINE PRACTICE

All equine veterinary clinics can implement steps to minimize stress and fear, and maximize positive experiences for patients. An important first step is to ensure that clinic staff have current, evidence-based information on equine behaviour, and the perceptual and cognitive abilities of the horse. For example, the outdated and incorrect notion that a difficult-to-handle horse is being dominant has about as much relevance in the modern veterinary clinic as the use of bloodletting to cure disease.

A basic understanding of learning principles, particularly positive and negative reinforcement, and systematic desensitization can help staff implement low-stress handling techniques with patients. Other protocols to decrease stress and minimize fear include:

- Having another calm horse in the vicinity during exams and procedures.
- The appropriate use of food, for example, giving a treat immediately after a desired behaviour has been performed, or used as a distraction during mildly unpleasant procedures (e.g., access to 'Likit' treats or hay bags). Where possible, in-clinic horses should also be allowed to eat from slow-feeder hay nets to increase time spent foraging.
- Minimizing restraint, e.g., the use of a loose lead rope when the horse is behaving as desired (standing calmly), and good timing when using negative reinforcement (pressure and release).
- Having a quiet clinic environment and calm, confident staff who use reinforcement-based handling practices that foster low arousal levels.



- The use of systematic desensitization with young, naïve, or anxious horses to introduce and habituate them to scary stimuli such as clippers, or water from a hose, keeping the horse under threshold so that they do not display escape or avoidance behaviours.
- Allowing the horse extra time for their eyes to adjust to changes of light (e.g., going from daylight outside into a darker barn).
- Accepting that not all clients will have taken the time to teach their horses to load, or leave the property, and thus horses hauled in may be at an emotional disadvantage before they are even examined. Such horses may benefit from a break to calm down before the exam begins, with a hay bag, and a relaxed horse visible nearby.
- Better handling through chemistry—anxiolytic sedatives should be considered whenever possible for procedures which are painful or distressing, before the horse becomes aroused.

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In summary, positive veterinary care impacts not only equine patients, but support staff, veterinarians, clients, and the veterinary clinic's reputation and image. For more information, the full position statement from the AVSAB can be downloaded as a PDF here: www.avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Positive-Veterinary-Care-Position-Statement-download.pdf. □



THIS PAGE Left to right: equine dental work; veterinarian examining horse (photos by Lauren Fraser).