

Understanding and Managing the Rising Costs of Equine Veterinary Care

By Doug Thal, DVM

This month's article is a topic critical to most horse owners and deals with a subject that I deal with on a daily basis – the cost of providing quality equine veterinary care to clients. This is a subject not often discussed frankly in this profession. Both horse owners and veterinarians find it uncomfortable to address. This article will talk about it.

No doubt, any service provided by modern and well equipped equine veterinarians is costly. From routine care to an unanticipated crisis, costs can be surprisingly high. How can you, the horse owner, obtain the very best veterinary care for your horse, yet not be financially overwhelmed? The answer lies first and foremost in educating yourself and maintaining a good working relationship and communication with your equine veterinarian. As discussed below, these points go hand in hand.

Why is Equine Veterinary Medicine So Expensive?

In part, veterinary charges for horses are much higher than those for small animals simply because of their size. The same amount of medicine necessary for the treatment of a small animal must be multiplied on a scale of 10 to more than 100 times for an effective dosage in a horse. The overhead costs associated with running a full service equine veterinary facility are higher than for small animal practices and rise each year. To maintain a viable business, equine veterinarians must pass these costs on to clients.

Of importance is the increasing specialization (and sub-specialization) in equine veterinary care. The trend is towards specialty equine practice that requires costly equipment, facilities, techniques and support staff. Equine dentistry, surgery, anesthesia, x-ray, ultrasound have all reached new levels of sophistication in private practice, and new levels of cost. Highly sophisticated and costly MRI, Nuclear medicine, and other specialties are also becoming increasingly common in private practice. While all of these advances mean more options for horse care, they also account for greatly increased cost. This trend toward specialized and expensive services in private practice is driven to a great extent by better informed horse owners who demand the best health care for their horses.

As for any small business, basic operating cost of doing business (overhead) is high for veterinary practice and continues to increase. Equine veterinary practice has especially high overhead.

Relatively large inventory, higher rates of liability insurance, utility expenses for complex practices, fuel for mobile service, specialized staffing, and all other costs are high and continue to increase.

Dedicated, highly trained equine professionals are hard to find and demand higher wages for their higher level of training, commitment and professionalism.

Drugs purchased through your equine veterinarian are typically more expensive than those purchased through veterinary supply catalogs. This difference relates to the costs of inventory, labor, administrative costs and quality control, which are relatively higher than for a large supply company. A responsible equine veterinarian is constantly trying to maintain a delicate balance by anticipating his or her client's needs, keeping certain drugs available for immediate dispensation, yet trying to keeping the overhead cost for unused inventory at a manageable level. Several real advantages in buying products from your veterinarian are convenience and 24-hour support and consultation. Emergency services provided by equine veterinarians reflect the fact that being available 24/7 requires major lifestyle compromises that require appropriate compensation.

9 Ways to Ensure Your Horses Health and Reduce Your Cost

Given these high and rising costs, what can you do to control the cost of keeping your horse healthy and performing at a high level?

1. Educate yourself. The single greatest reason for clients to spend excessively on their horse is lack of knowledge. The problem becomes where to acquire this knowledge. Your equine veterinarian can help you choose the right products and services and can direct you toward reliable educational resources. In a complex world of expensive OTC supplements and bogus claims, he or she can guide you in basic care, preventative medicine, and the health care that your horse really requires. Many expensive products advertised as miracle cures actually have no benefit and some may even be harmful. View these products with a critical eye and when in doubt, ask your vet for advice.
2. Provide basic care. Invest in the basics, including a clean and safe environment, proper fencing, feed, water, and hoof care. I can't tell you how often complicated an expensive healthcare issues arise simply because basic care has not been provided.
3. Preventative healthcare programs. In tandem with providing basic care, investigate preventative healthcare programs like Pfizer's Preventicare Program, which is essentially colic surgery insurance bundled with veterinary care. We have offered this program through my practice for years and several clients have been saved financially by it. Similarly, explore the costs and benefits of equine medical insurance.
4. Communication. Establish good communication with your equine veterinarian early on. Be frank and direct with respect to your finances and always ask for options and estimates. Let him or her help you determine what course is best for you and your horse. Always call if your horse has received treatment and is not responding or is doing poorly. A minor adjustment in treatment may be all that is needed to turn in the right direction.

5. Diagnosis is key, if possible. When your horse develops a problem prompt consultation with a knowledgeable professional for a diagnosis is ultimately less expensive than purchasing expensive supplements or utilizing alternative therapies without first trying to determine the origin of the problem.
6. Act quickly. Do not wait! Contact your equine veterinarian the moment you notice a problem. Your veterinarian may be able to assist you over the phone in determining whether immediate examination is even necessary. Delaying this call may mean that the horse improves but may also mean that the problem progresses. This gamble may increase the final veterinary bill. Examples of problems for which you should immediately call your veterinarian include colic, choke, foaling problems, eye problems, severe lameness, and wounds located near joints or that seem otherwise complicated. With early veterinary contact, many of these problems can be successfully managed with a simple phone call or simple treatments rather than life saving, expensive heroics.
7. Options and estimates. There is rarely a single solution to an equine healthcare problem. Ask your veterinarian for different treatment options and an estimate for the associated cost of each. Although expensive treatments exist and are becoming more and more available, they are not necessarily appropriate in all circumstances. One of our most important jobs is to inform our clients of the range of options available to them and the costs and benefits of these options. It can be difficult to make these economic decisions in the moment of crisis and I encourage horse owners to consider their general approach to this question before such a moment arrives.
8. Farm calls. Transporting your horse to an equine veterinary facility is much less costly than a farm call, which includes the veterinarian's driving time, vehicle mileage and the ever-increasing cost of fuel. If you don't have a trailer, make a friend with someone who does. Specialized services can be more easily and less expensively delivered at a well-equipped clinic.

Conclusion

Horse ownership is expensive and proper veterinary care accounts for a significant percentage of that expense. Ultimately the relationship you have with your equine veterinarian will guide you and your horse down a balanced path. Use your equine veterinarian as a sounding board to help you determine the level of care you are comfortable with, and discuss the costs of these services frankly and openly.