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Equitation Science: ‘The Road Ahead’

**Advancing equine veterinary practice by application of learning theory:
Injuries to vets, owners and horses can be reduced by taking a scientific
approach to horse handling during veterinary exams**

Equine veterinarians are highly trained to diagnose and treat injuries and disease. However, their work with sick horses places them at a high risk of personal injury. UK veterinarian, Gemma Pearson surveyed vets and support staff at the Equine Clinic at the Royal (Dick) College of Veterinary Science in Edinburgh, and found that in a 12 month period, eight staff had experienced an injury serious enough to need treatment, with five of those requiring hospitalisation.

Presenting her findings at the 2012 International Society for Equitation Science conference in Edinburgh, Pearson found that over 20 work days were lost to injuries caused by horses undergoing treatment. Staff reported that on a daily basis, they encountered difficult-to-manage horses and that put their personal safety at risk.

“Within the constraints of a busy clinic responsible for specialist referrals for all of Scotland and much of Northern England, developing strategies to reduce injuries by improving horse handling was a priority” Pearson said.

“By applying simple, scientifically validated training techniques, we were able to handle a number of horses who had previously injured the handlers and vets treating them”.

Pearson’s work focussed on two of the most common sources of difficult behaviour; refusing to enter the examination stocks and being needle-shy, which staff reported encountering on a daily basis.

“To manage horses which were reluctant to enter the examination stocks, we applied a negative reinforcement technique, which involved applying a mildly aversive cue to the horse and then rewarding it for approaching the stocks by taking the cue away.

In this way the horses learn that approaching and then entering the stocks will result in the cue disappearing,” Pearson explained. “Within a very short period our ‘difficult’ horses were calmly entering and remaining in the stocks. This reduced the time required to examine the horses and enabled the vets and support staff to attend to other duties.”

“Our needle-shy horses had previously reared up and injured vets, however by applying a technique known as overshadowing, we were able to give these horses injections without danger to ourselves or the horse.”

Overshadowing involves applying a neutral cue, such as to step backwards or come forwards from pressure on the halter while also exposing the horse to the object or event it fears, in this case, the needle.

“We started very gradually and broke the injection process down to small steps,” Pearson explained. “By ensuring that the horse responded to our neutral cues immediately and calmly, we were able to overshadow its fear of the needle. Within a single session, we could administer an injection without the horse reacting at all”.

Key to both methods is making sure that the horse stays as calm and relaxed as possible, reducing the likelihood it will react fearfully or uncontrollably.

Relaxed horses are not fearful and consequently the examination or treatment can be completed efficiently and with a minimum of stress on either horse or vet.

While traditional restraint techniques such as sedation and nose twitching will always have a place in the veterinary examination of horses, veterinarians incorporating these simple techniques reduce their risk of injury and boost client confidence.

“We believe that horses and their owners will benefit enormously from a reduction in the stress and anxiety which a visit to the vet can entail”, Pearson concluded.

The International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to facilitate research into the training of horses to enhance horse welfare and improve the horse-rider relationship. www.equitationsscience.com

For more information contact:

ISES President
Prof Paul McGreevy
presidents@equitationsscience.com
(+61 423 464 505)