**Horse Dentist Makes On-Farm Calls**

Good dental care can add years of life to a horse, says Dr. Tom Allen, who makes his living as a “horse dentist”. He’s one of only four registered veterinarians in the Missouri and Illinois area to devote his complete practice to horse dentistry.

He travels the area pulling a horse trailer that was modified to hold one stall and all his equipment. He treats 30 to 50 horses a week, with fees varying from $100 to $150 per horse depending on the work needed.

According to Dr. Allen, horse dentistry is a hot topic these days, with many horse magazines publishing articles about it. While there are few full-time horse dentists, the specialty is gaining acceptance and the importance of proper dental care for horses is making a comeback in veterinary schools, he says. Several books on horse dentistry have been published recently, after nearly a century of neglect on the subject.

“More and more veterinarians and horse folk have in the last few years that we can help horses live longer and perform better with regular tooth care every 3 to 12 months,” says Dr. Allen. “It’s a myth that horses show signs of dental problems before they become serious. The best prevention is competent dental care, as opposed to waiting until the horse is beyond help as is too often the case now.”

Horse dentistry equipment is undergoing revolutionary changes, he says, with everything from new solid carbide float blades, high speed power equipment, new and improved devices for holding open the mouth of the patient, to halters for holding the patient’s head up or down for easier access to allow the correction of dental problems.

According to Dr. Allen, most horses don’t show symptoms of dental problems. However, horses that have gone more than six months since their last dental work almost always have points forming on the outer edge of the upper cheek teeth. “Too much or uneven wear leads to severe problems in a high percentage of horses. Grass, hay, and grain can contain silica, a very abrasive substance which causes the teeth to be ground down continuously. Since the upper cheek teeth are set wider apart than the lowers, sharp protuberances are left on their outer edges. These points cut into the lining of the mouth. The abrasions allow bacteria and toxins to enter the horse’s system, putting stress on the heart and liver, and immune systems, all of which take its toll on the horse over the years. Performing a ‘bite alignment’ shortens the incisors, so the cheek teeth can once again chew hay and grain easily.”

Dr. Allen received certification through the International Association of Equine Dentistry, an association composed of veterinarians and dental technicians. He’s also a member of the American Association of Equine Practitioners (website: www.aaepp.org).

He inserts a full-mouth speculum. It holds the horse’s mouth open so he can examine the teeth more carefully and then perform the necessary grinding and other work. The head of the horse can either be rested on the edge of the stall or the speculum is hooked to a rope from above. Without the tranquilizer, the horse might harm itself when put in this rig.

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