

Changing Times: The Veterinarian & The Internet

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Demand for equine veterinary services has unquestionably been reduced by the economic downturn and the contraction of the horse industry. Increasingly, horse owners are turning to the Internet prior to or instead of consulting a veterinarian. So how do we remain the authority on equine health?

In the old days, when a horse owner perceived a problem with his or her horse's health, he or she called the veterinarian; their options for finding answers elsewhere were limited. Today's world, however, is very different. The Internet provides instant access to vast amounts of information on almost any horse health topic. This should be a good thing that empowers horse owners to make better choices for their horses. Unfortunately, the nature of Internet content and the way horse owners use this information reinforces a flawed logic that is challenging veterinary practice as we know it, and horses are suffering as a result.

A Level Playing Field

With less disposable income, horse owners are looking for the most cost-effective ways to care for their horses. The Internet provides thousands of perspectives on horse health, all on a level playing field. This information is not prioritized by accuracy,

validity, or source, but by visibility, which is determined by search engine optimization (SEO).

Only a relatively small number of equine veterinary websites have any veterinary involvement or

oversight. Much of the content is a thinly veiled attempt to sell a product or service. Many of our clients have no way of critically evaluating what they are reading.

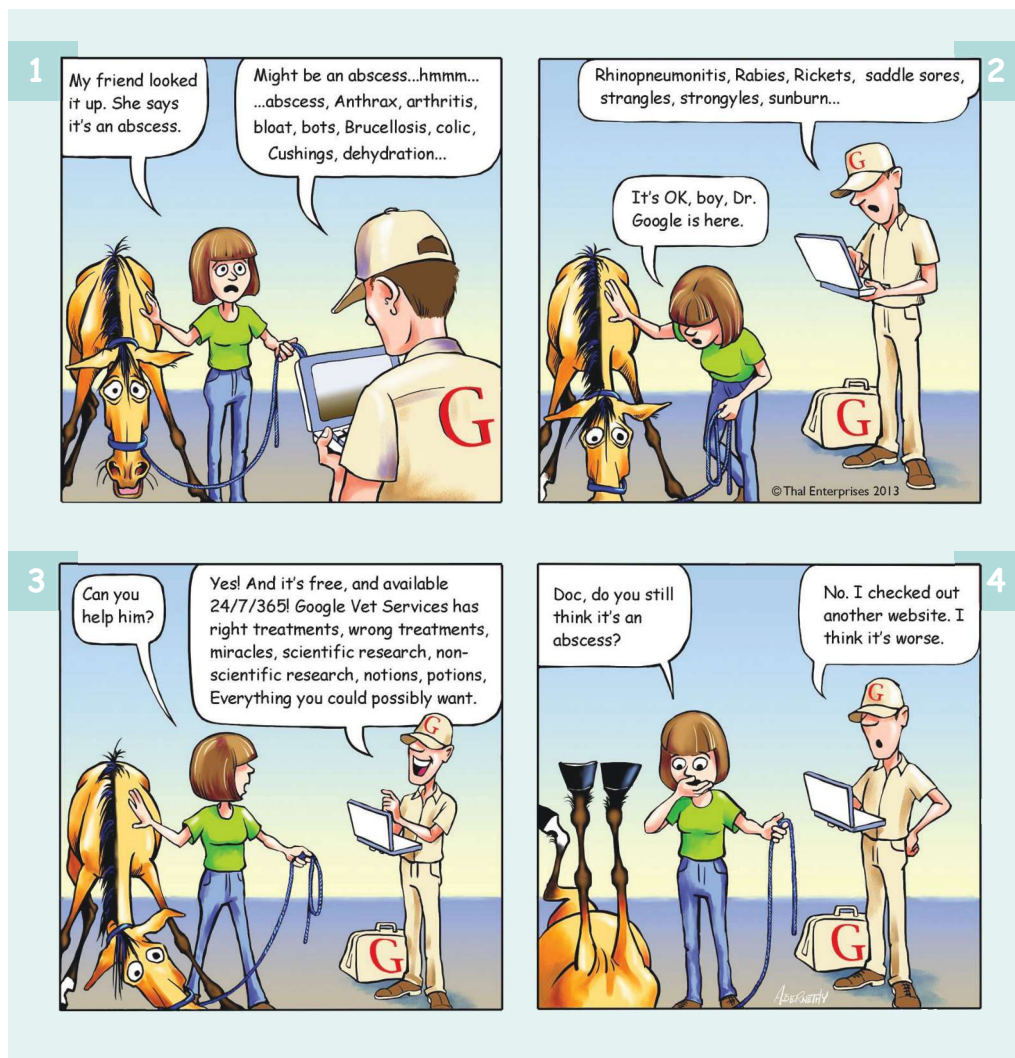
When a horse owner tries to research his or her perception of their horse's problem on the Internet, they might neglect the fact that they are starting with their observation (which is often very biased) rather than a diagnosis. As a result of this flawed process, horses are regularly the victim of incorrect or delayed diagnosis and treatment, which,

ironically, can ultimately lead to greater veterinary expense and a poorer prognosis.

We Are Diagnosticians, Not Dispensaries

Because of our training and experience in equine health, we equine veterinarians should be the primary health care providers for horses. Veterinary medicine is based on a rigorous and proven scientific approach and delivers better outcomes than randomly applied treatments without a diagnosis. We have a responsibility to differentiate ourselves by highlighting this fundamental difference.

I try to explain my veterinary method to my clients. My process starts with collecting my client's observations. When conducting a thorough history, physical exami-



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nation, and selected diagnostics, I try to reach a diagnosis that directs me to provide a targeted treatment plan. I try to fortify our website and Facebook posts with case reports showing how this veterinary process yields good results and how it can actually save my clients money.

Importantly, if I let my clients believe, for instance, that every horse demonstrating colic signs just needs a shot of flunixin meglumine, soon my clients will begin seeking the flunixin meglumine and not me.

I try to be inclusive and as open-minded as I can be, while maintaining a gate-keeping role. I encourage my clients to consult me if they have questions about material they read. I explain to them that I favor evidence-based treatments, but that I am not necessarily opposed to complementary therapies. I believe that Eastern-based veterinary treatments, regenerative therapy, and complementary therapies should all be held to some level of scrutiny and skepticism.

The Ideal Client, Made Real

With proper education, I believe horse owners can become better caretakers and clients and also see

increased value in the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR).

Our clients must learn the difference between their observations and a veterinarian's diagnosis. The starting point for addressing any equine health issue is "What does the client see or perceive?" Without jumping to any conclusions about the underlying cause, I encourage my clients to use and sharpen their power of observation and share their findings with me via phone, e-mail, or text messaging.

I believe that horse owners should be able to perform a bundled set of basic skills—such as taking temperature, pulse, and respiration rates—so that when they do call me with a problem, they can provide me with helpful information at the outset of the call. It also equips them to assess their horse's overall wellness, even when there's not a problem.

Clients playing a more active role in their horses' health become more compliant and better able to deliver required treatments and monitor response to treatment, leading to successful outcomes. If horse owners operate with the VCPR squarely in mind, I believe that they will

naturally seek out more legitimate Internet content and discriminate against unfounded nonveterinary claims.

Conclusion

We must face the fact that "Dr. Google" is here to stay, but with a few adjustments in our approach, so are we. By taking more time to explain our thought processes and properly educate and empower our clientele—whether at appointments or via social media—I believe that we can remain (or regain our status as) the most credible source for equine health information. 🌿

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Summer is wrapping up and fall is coming on. With the fall comes the full launch of a new program we at Merck Animal Health are very excited about: Horse Care for Life™.

You will notice a story in this month's *Partners in Practice* about the program. We hope you enjoy reading about this exciting new initiative designed to educate your clients, foster the veterinarian-client relationship, and ultimately improve the level of care provided to horses. If you are interested in becoming a Horse Care for Life clinic, please reach out to your Merck Animal Health sales representative, or contact us at 800/521-5767.

We wish you and your practice a great fall season and look forward to seeing you in Nashville at the AAEP convention.

Sincerely,

Joe Ferraro
Equine Product Manager
Merck Animal Health