

## Can Anybody be an Equine Dentist?

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The world in which we live is controlled by a number of rules that we bring about to ensure safety for all. If you wish to drive a motor vehicle on the public roads, you have to demonstrate your ability to do so safely and correctly. If you would like to drive a bigger vehicle, like a lorry, you need to take a further test; a Heavy Goods Vehicle test. If you would like to carry fare paying passengers, then you need to take a Public Service Vehicle theory test and undergo further training. These steps are there to ensure the safety of pedestrians, other road users and passengers.

I have wondered for some time now, why in the equestrian world, we would not follow a similar process when it comes to equine dentistry. Not many people realise that any individual can buy a few tooth rasps and a bucket and can begin offering services as an equine dentist. There are no checks, no safety barriers and worst of all, the ones that suffer at the hands of these people cannot even speak for themselves!



*A horse being examined. The dentist is using a full mouth speculum.*

A few years back, there was an initiative to define a competency level for equine dentistry. Unfortunately, it was developed to ensure that equine dental practitioners that were performing more advanced dentistry, were considered competent enough to be exempt from the restrictions on this kind of work as

defined by the vet act. The examination has a theory element and a practical element, and successful participants should be defined as Level 2 Qualified and be governed by the wording of the accompanying Exemption Order.

However, as with many things in the equestrian world, final agreement has been hard to come by and the Exemption Order wording has still not been finalised. That said, it is still the only official examination in the UK that allows an equine dentist to demonstrate their competence. Although this level is higher than required for the majority of equine dentistry work, as a horse owner, you should be able to assume that somebody who can work at the higher level should be able to perform routine dentistry competently.

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The examination has also been welcomed by veterinarians, as dentistry is only a very small part of their training, who can now take the examination to demonstrate their own equine dentistry competency to their clients. There are only two bodies in the UK that are able to run these examinations. One is the WorldWide Association of Equine Dentists (WWAED) and the other is the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA).

The exemption order covers advanced work like tooth removal and the use of power tools. However, the majority of horses in the UK will not require this depth of work to be performed upon them. Most horses will require management of their mouth. This will mean removing the sharp points that occur on the edges of the horse's teeth and ensuring that the teeth have good occlusion, meaning that the upper and lower jaw teeth meet as well as possible. This enables the horse to break down the food so that the maximum amount of goodness can be extracted.



*Large hooks on the upper pre-molars. These have developed as they are not being opposed from below. These hooks were cutting into the gum on the lower jaw.*

The mouth of the horse is paramount to the wellbeing of the horse. The gastro intestinal system (GIS) of the horse can only do the best that it can with what it is given. The better prepared that the food is, the more efficient the GIS will be. It is important that anybody who is offering equine dental services has a good understanding of the horse's mouth and its function in order to ensure that it stays operating at its maximum efficiency.

Therefore, I have to wonder why we have never introduced a basic examination for anybody who wishes to perform equine dentistry?

In our association (WWAED), we felt that it was key for us to understand the capabilities of our members and we introduced our own examination. We use this examination as an Entrance examination for our association. Individuals are only on probation until such time as they are able to pass the exam and become full members. The exam is in two parts, theory and practical, and a participant needs to be able to pass the theory before they will be allowed to take the

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practical. The theory element tests the candidates knowledge of the components and the function of the horse's mouth, as well as knowledge on routine procedures, hygiene and horse management skills.

I believe that this type of examination should be introduced for all practitioners of equine dentistry and only a successful pass will allow the individual to perform equine dentistry. This is a standard that could be introduced at any time and all competent practitioners would have nothing to fear from taking this exam. It would also ensure a rise in the standards of equine dentistry as the poorer practitioners would either need to improve their skills or stop practising.

At the end of the day, the field of equine dentistry is there for the benefit of the horse and these wonderful creatures deserve to have competent practitioners working on them. They cannot speak for themselves, but we can. We can ensure that they receive the proper level of treatment that they deserve. If you are not allowed to drive a car until you have shown that you are capable of doing so, why should individuals be allowed to affect the health of our horses without demonstrating that they are capable of doing the work properly.

Our horses shouldn't be the ones to suffer.



*A large, upper jaw wolf tooth. Wolf teeth erupt in the bars of the mouth where the bit would normally sit. These can come into contact with the bit and can be quite painful for the horse.*