

What do you know about your Horse Dentist?

In the modern age of horse ownership, we know that we can take care of every need that our horse may have. We have veterinarians looking after the general well-being of our horse and we have farriers to look after their feet. If there are specific muscular, carriage or performance problems we can call on osteopaths, physiotherapists and even holistic healers. However, one area of the horse that can impact so many other areas is the horse's mouth; cue the dentist.

Dental problems can surface in many ways. Your horse may start to act differently, perhaps becoming irritable or bad tempered because of the pain. They may try to avoid the painful area and give the indication of a back or leg problem when moving. Remember that when we place any kind of tack on a horse, even a head collar, we could be placing pressure on the painful area, making it even more difficult for the horse to avoid the pain. We might see condition deteriorate, weight being dropped. The horses' general demeanour may change and they could become listless or disinterested. Other obvious signs might be difficulty when eating, dropping food or quidding if they are unable to chew properly.



We know that these problems are serious problems. In the wild when a horse experiences severe dental problems, death usually results. If a horse is unable to eat properly then it will struggle to survive. With domesticated horses, our solution is to call the dentist.

The big question is, how much do you know about your dentist? Did you know that anybody can buy a rasp and a bucket and begin to practise equine dentistry? They would not be breaking any laws! Now I am not trying to imply for one minute that this is the standard route into the equine dentistry profession, but remember, it is a possibility.

Most practising equine dentists today have taken the time and invested the money into training. However, even this is not as straightforward as it may seem.

Many dentists travel to the USA to attend equine dental training clinics and achieve a certification through this process. Did you know that in excess of 90% of equine dentistry performed in the USA is performed on a sedated horse? The statistics for the UK are almost exactly the opposite, with in excess of 90% of the dentistry performed in the UK being on non-sedated horses. This will mean that the techniques that the dentists are trained in could differ. It requires a lot more skill to work on a non-sedated horse without causing pain or damage within the mouth. Once again, I do not wish to generalise, as there are many good dentists around that have taken part in equine dentistry training courses in the USA. The problem for us as horse owners, is, how do we identify the good ones? I will come back to this later.

Other equine dentists have taken training courses in the UK. There are a number of establishments, usually run by practising dentists that can offer training in equine dentistry. Some of these establishments will offer certification at the end of the course, but this is only a certification according to the standards that they themselves have defined. Some of these establishments are now tailoring their courses to meet UK defined standards, but this is by no means across the board yet.

Other dentists have gone down the route of an apprenticeship. The problem here is that the pupil is only as good as the master, and if the master has not been trained correctly, then the pupil can not gain the right experience. Just imagine, an apprentice could be undertaking training from somebody who is self-taught!

Many vet practises are now offering equine dental services, and some of the vets have specialised in dentistry and are very capable. However, training to be a veterinarian only has 9 days on teeth, of which approximately 1 ½ days are devoted to equine teeth. As you can appreciate this does not properly prepare a new veterinarian for dentistry in the field. Also, you have to remember that a veterinarian has a responsibility for many other areas of the horse, not just the mouth and so it is difficult, albeit not impossible, for a veterinarian to build up the expertise that a practising dentist can.

Choosing a dentist is probably starting to look like a bit of a minefield now, however, there is a way to identify a good dentist and also to help ensure the maintenance of good dentistry standards.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (R.C.V.S.) and the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (D.E.F.R.A.) have been working together with representatives from the various equine dentist associations, to establish a standard for the UK. The standard is referred to as the Level 2 Exemption Order. This means that a number of procedures that were deemed to be covered by the Vet Act, will be allowed to be performed by equine dentists on the proviso that they have passed the Level 2 Exemption exam.

The Level 2 Exemption examination covers:

- Extraction of loose teeth
- Extraction of vestigial upper pre-molars 'wolf teeth'
- Dental hook removal
- Techniques requiring the use of dental shears, inertia hammers and powered dental instruments (including power rasps)
- Non surgical orthodontic treatments
- Treatment of fractured and diseased teeth
- Extraction of dental fragments and palliative rasping of fractured and adjacent teeth.



or

Therefore, by definition, Level 1 covers:

- Examination of teeth;
- Routine rasping (excluding power rasping);
- Removal of sharp enamel points, small dental overgrowths such as hooks and spurs;
- Bit seat shaping;
- Removal of loose deciduous caps; and
- Removal of supragingival calculus.

The R.C.V.S. and D.E.F.R.A. have approved two groups, the WorldWide Association of Equine Dentistry (W.W.A.E.D.) and the British Equine Veterinary Association (B.E.V.A.) to be able to offer this examination.

A number of dentists in the UK have now taken and passed this examination, and, although the Exemption order has not yet been introduced, you can be comfortable in the knowledge that the dentists have achieved a standard that has been identified by all of the governing bodies that are involved with equine dentistry in the UK.

Some veterinarians have also taken this examination and this denotes that while they may have had difficulty in gaining enough underlying experience in their veterinarian training and practise, they can now demonstrate sufficient skills to pass the Level 2 Exemption examination.

Currently, the W.W.A.E.D. is the only UK equine dentistry association that monitors the capability of their members to perform at Level 1. The W.W.A.E.D. requires their members to pass an entrance examination before they can become full members, and then provides continual assessment of members through to Level 2.

In summary, wherever your dentist received their training, the USA, the UK, through an apprenticeship or as part of their veterinarian training, if they have taken their R.C.V.S. and D.E.F.R.A. approved Level 2 examination, then you can be sure they are more than capable of performing the dentistry procedures needed by your horse. It is the only standard that all equine dentistry in the UK should be judged against.

Also, by ensuring that you only use Level 2 qualified dentists, you are discouraging untrained laypersons from performing dentistry on horses, and encouraging all dentists to achieve the Level 2 standard. If you check on the websites of the W.W.A.E.D. and B.E.V.A., you will find directories of all dentists that have passed the Level 2 Exemption exam.

At the end of the day, the only ones to suffer are the horses, and they don't have a say in the discussion. This is your opportunity to speak on their behalf.

Steve Goode
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The WorldWide Association of Equine Dentistry

Useful websites referred to in this piece:

WorldWide Association of Equine Dentistry	www.wwaed.com
British Equine Veterinary Association	www.beva.org.uk/
DEFRA – Equine Dentistry	www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/ahws/vservices/eq-dentistry/index.htm
British Association of Equine Dentists	www.equinedentistry.org.uk/
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons	www.rcvs.org.uk/