

BY TOM ALLEN, DVM

# Changes in Horse Dentistry

**W**e all want our horses to have comfort, enhanced performance, more nutrition efficiency, and even a good chance of living longer. So we're all glad to see the changes that are occurring in the field of equine dentistry, a long-neglected part of horse health care that is now, fortunately, coming back into prominence.

**The Good**—Veterinarians have been out of the loop for decades regarding equine dental care, but we're now beginning to realize its importance, and we're availing ourselves of excellent opportunities to learn more about providing thorough equine dental care. As we become more aware of its importance to all horses, beginning at a few months of age and continuing lifelong, we're seeing dramatic changes in recommendations for dental care.

The largest organization of veterinarians dedicated to horse

health care, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, has been offering excellent programs for continuing education in equine dentistry these last few years. Now we veterinarians have the opportunity to upgrade our knowledge of—and our practical application of—dentistry as it applies to the horse.

The lack of adequate dental care being advocated by those of us involved in equine veterinary medical practice is being remedied as we see positive effects from an increasing number of non-veterinary equine dental practitioners (operating “below the radar” in most states), who have been providing a level of care that hasn't been taught in

the formal veterinary education institutes for the last century.

Thorough dentistry for horses is finally being noticed; in my opinion, this is due to a grassroots resurrection by non-veterinary equine dental practitioners who have initiated a renewed interest in, and appreciation for, the importance of this part of health care. Many current veterinary leaders in this field received their introduction to the subject from non-veterinary equine dental practitioners who have been doing thorough work for 20-30 years.

The International Association of Equine Dentistry (IAED) is an organization started by non-veterinary equine dental practitioners dedicated to promoting thorough equine dental care. The IAED has established guidelines for the provision of horse dentistry that are, I believe, unsurpassed by any other organization, and it offers

testing so interested practitioners may ascertain their level of competence according to others who have much more experience in providing horse dental care. (See “IAED Guidelines” under “About us” on the IAED site: [www.iaeqd.org](http://www.iaeqd.org).)

**The Bad**—The bad news is that nearly all of the United States veterinarians who currently work on horses would have to do dentistry full time in order to provide dentistry for all the horses in this country—and that is not about to happen.

So we need more qualified individuals performing horse dentistry. As more owners become educated about the importance of dentistry to their horses, as a result of more veterinarians being informed, the demand will continue to increase. Yet the supply of qualified dental practitioners is not increasing proportionately.

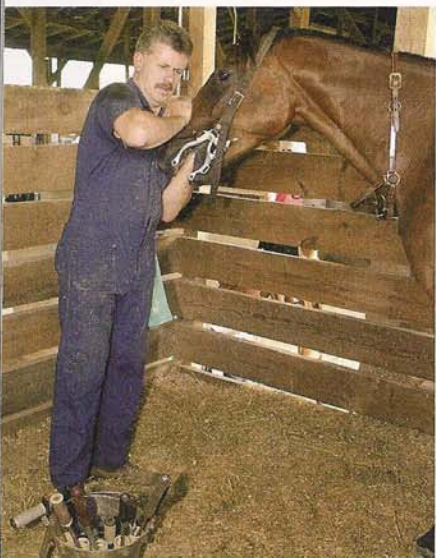
**The Ugly**—A few individuals who have influence with legislators are encouraging states to rewrite veterinary practice acts, placing more restrictions upon the practice of equine dentistry. While the demand is increasing and the supply of veterinary equine practitioners is decreasing, these individuals are attempting to deny the horse-owning public access to any dentistry providers except those with a veterinary license or those certified as veterinary technicians and employed by veterinarians.

This would keep the individuals who brought back dentistry from being able to continue providing it for owners (and the veterinarians who refer clients to them) unless they can stop doing so and attend a two- or four-year veterinary technician course (and very little exposure to equine dentistry is found in such courses).

**A Solution**—The IAED initiated certification testing, having certified over 20 veterinarians and several dozen non-veterinary members here in the United States, is now attempting to gather information relative to the strength of horse owners' support of the non-veterinary equine dental professionals. The effort has been named the Smiling Horse Campaign, and it is being conducted in order to obtain evidence showing that horse owners are in favor of retaining their right to have a choice about who can or cannot provide services for their horses.

The solution: If every veterinarian who ministers to substantial numbers of horses hires or refers to a non-veterinary equine dental practitioner, we will have the bases covered! 🐾

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ANNE EBERHARDT

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