The Equitarians Vision 2010

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1. Introduction
The use of working equids is increasing worldwide in the face of rising petroleum costs and decreasing agricultural income. Refugees, because of wars or famine, have their animals confiscated as they enter camps. In many cases, the animal was their only means of livelihood and transport. Aid agencies are focused only on human health and not on the working animals. Thus, their loss is not only inhumane, it makes recovery nearly impossible. Reconnecting people with working equids would be the most appropriate, cost-effective solution to rebuilding lives and the community (Figs. 1–4).

2. The Problem
There are ~100 million working equids (horses, mules, donkeys) worldwide that are vital to agriculture and critical in transportation of goods. Urban use is rising for working equids.

3. Commerce Begins on Their Back
Recent disasters in Haiti have clearly shown that animals could continue to deliver foodstuffs to local markets, despite severe infrastructure damage. The problem became one of maldistribution. Where do we, as equine veterinarians, go from here? What specifically can we do to help the working horses of the world? How can I begin a career track that allows me to expand my reach and still pay a mortgage? What sorts of jobs are available? Are there short-term projects one can do or must I just send money? How do I begin to develop a career path that will allow me to use my skills, either full or part time?1 Veterinarians are problem solvers, diagnostics, incredibly hard working, and altruistic. We see through red tape, around and over obstacles, and cut to the core of problems. Many aid efforts are often misdirected, duplicated, underestimated, and underfunded. Many efforts are undertaken that, although sometimes heroic and possibly beneficial (deworming and floating teeth on horses whose main problem is lack of food, etc.), are missing their mark. Re-prioritization and re-direction will often result from outside examination, consultation, or combining efforts of disparate groups. In the absence of directed outside influence by governmental bodies and an increasingly distracted public, it is up to private interests to step in, educate, and, in many cases, organize effective action.2

4. Training Beyond Practice
Disaster training and coordination is an important component of work in any disaster. During a recent assessment visit to Haiti, our first “official act” was to meet with the Minister of Agriculture, a veterinarian named Dr. Milien, and discuss the need for serious training for the native veterinari-
ans. He recognized the needs for working equids and keeping agriculture intact as a top priority.

The need for intense training by skilled practitioners on an annual basis is a fundamental part of an ongoing effort. Bringing in teams of practitioners to teach practical surgical and medical skills is a basic tenant of the ongoing plan.

Saddle and equipment sores are a major source of disability. If an animal can’t work, his family doesn’t eat. Training locals in harness construction and fitting provides both humane equipment and a new trade for many.

5. Step 1: Acquire Skills

Become an Expert in the Routine
Clinical skills and expertise get better with practice and field training. Organizations working in developing countries need skilled, practiced hands to both perform and teach required procedures. Dealing with a group of panicked horse owners in a show barn, just exposed to strangles or equine infectious anemia (EIA), is excellent practice for looking at and managing disease outbreaks everywhere! Searching for a bleeder, deep in a wound on a recalcitrant horse, teaches patience, dexterity, and innovation!

Don’t Underestimate the Client
A struggling horse owner in the developing world has to make a living and support his family on less than we spend on lattes! He knows his animal and wants the best. Being board certified is not a requirement for being a traveling veterinarian but is a real asset. The attention to detail that can only be acquired by time in the trenches, with proper mentoring and support, is only enhanced by passing it on! These skills also apply to working with many aid organizations.

Teach as You Assist
The only way toward sustainability is education. Assist and, in some cases, direct, but always be ready to fade into the background once proper principles are in place. Innovation comes only after solid principles that are learned well are applied. The “germ theory of disease” is constant and worldwide. No shortcuts!

6. Step 2: Do Your Homework

The Web Is a Resource Without Parallel
One’s vision can only be enhanced by “visiting” sites and cultures using the Internet. There is no part of the globe that can’t be explored. What are your talents and where do you think they would be best used? A personal inventory is the first step. What is your motivation? “Saving the world” doesn’t count. What are your skills (language, surgery, lameness, infectious diseases, nutrition)? Do you have time preferences? Can you give a week, a month, or a year? What are your financial resources? Can you contribute toward expenses or need assistance?

Network
Many community-based groups and service organizations have national or international reach. If you join them, make sure that they also have interests and goals similar to your own. Most do not have any idea what you do or what you can offer. Pulling human teeth or deworming children in a remote jungle village may not be what you had in mind. Many groups are ideologically directed, with services being only a “hook” to gain access.

Become Problem Based
Most of one’s professional education is problem based. Looking for solutions is only effective after diagnosis has been made. Veterinarians with clinical and practical experience are usually world-class problem solvers. Research the political and historic background of areas in which you want to serve. Cultural sensitivity (or lack thereof) is the downfall of many otherwise appropriate projects. There are programs that allow practitioners to receive appropriate training and begin the networking process while still working. There are many short time postings and projects that allow such transitions and will give satisfaction and an initiation into a life that may or may not work out as expected, but will nonetheless, be rewarding.

Jobs Versus Real Work
There are few jobs working with any of the various agencies and organizations that we will discuss that are suitable for recent graduates with limited experience. There are many opportunities for seasoned, skilled professionals with appropriate background and interests. On the international level, most
agencies are run by professional bureaucrats who have worked their way up to a position of authority, having no familiarity with clinical skills. It is possible to achieve a successful career path as a staff veterinarian in a foundation-sponsored hospital or as a consultant to governments and NGOs alike. The Armed Services have a constant need for career path veterinarians in health sciences. Disaster relief agencies and the United Nations have similar needs.3

Volunteer or “Voluntourist”? Starting on a career path in equitarian work certainly will involve stepping into volunteer situations. There are many possibilities available, and the Internet is the best place to begin searching. Veterinary students have access to a stunning array of such choices. Seasoned practitioners may be inclined to participate in short-term, ongoing projects that also involve cross-cultural and touring aspects rather than direct participation. These are also excellent venues to test one’s adaptability to longer-term situations.

Mid-Career Challenges Changing lifestyles and careers is no longer unusual, and becoming an equitarian is no exception.

The necessary skills can only be acquired in postgraduate training and practice. Research, medical sales and representation, and disease research can all be applied in some aspect of an equitarian enterprise.4 There is no better time to start.
7. Step 3: Make A Plan

Teaching in Mongolia? Working on Reservations?

Life comes at you in many interesting ways. A long-term career in practice or at a university hospital can morph into second careers in places as far flung as Mongolia, Latin America, or the deepest parts of the rural American West. In most cases, we don’t actually plan for it, we grow into it. Advanced surgical training can be applied and appreciated anywhere in the world (Figs. 5–7).

8. Successful Projects

Common Traits of Successful Projects

- A local initiative—work cooperatively at the invitation of the local community
- Serve a predefined area to track a measurable impact
- Return regularly to build trust
- A clear and defined focus, “Medicine is the Mission and the Gift”

The success of any equitarian program is dependent on the following:

- Identifying the needs of a specific community
- Meeting local needs with quality, culturally relevant teaching materials

Fig. 5. Surgical procedures are watched with great interest everywhere.

Fig. 6. Deworming clinics are an essential part of health care and allow access to communities and other health problems.

Fig. 7. Teaching as you work is aided by simple props and good translators.

Fig. 8. Helping horses is helping families. This family is carrying a week’s supply of rice. A mulito foal accompanies them.
Taking time to establish trusting relationships with veterinarians and owners
Following through with consistent teaching and mentoring

Goals and Outcomes

- New grads learn adaptability, restraint techniques
- Work is done under primitive conditions
- Cultural interactions are invaluable
- Problem-based learning is the order of the day

Needs for the Future

- Scholarships for new graduates
- Supplies and support from our partners
- Support for other organizations so that they can do the same
- Educators to help owners become self-reliant caretakers of their animals

Decide on the Core Value of Animal Versus Human Welfare

- It is difficult to improve animal welfare if it does not improve human welfare.
- One can’t improve human welfare at the expense of or without improvement of animal welfare (Fig. 8).

9. Going Forward, Looking Ahead

Why Should AAEP Join These Projects?

- To be known as an equine welfare activist
- To be involved in and support placing equine veterinarians into welfare training
- To give visibility and support to ongoing programs
- To coordinate donations and distribution of funds and supplies

The Working Horse Problem

There are at least 100 million working equids in the world today. They provide traction and transportation worldwide. They are increasingly important in urban settings as tourist transport. There is a need for veterinary care, disease control, and nutrition. Education of caregivers, veterinarians, and health care workers is the key to improving the lives of the animals and their families.

References