Getting Along, Sharing the Fire! The Care and Feeding of Good Professional Relationships

Jay G. Merriam, DVM, MS

The development and maintenance of professional relationships is an ongoing, sometimes difficult process. It takes conscious effort and a willingness to put the patient first and ego second. Disparities in education and experience are the most common barriers, but can be overcome by patience and willingness to share common goals. Author's address: Massachusetts Equine Clinic, 75 Locust Street, Uxbridge, Massachusetts 01569; e-mail: jgmerriam@massequine.com. © 2010 AAEP.

1. Introduction

The history of the veterinary and farrier professions is unique because they had their origins as one. These two ancient and honorable professions sprang jointly from man's effort to provide care and support to his most long-lived and faithful companion—his horses. In ages past, as science and medicine embraced technology and traveled different paths, they split. Each developed their own practice, science, and ethics, and now, in many ways, are coming together again. The earliest veterinarians were farriers, men with iron and fire at their fingertips. Their goals of enhancing and enabling their charge's abilities were legend. Vulcan shod the horses of the Gods, and in the modern age, lent his craft to better tires! With their cautery, poultices, blood letting, and bold strokes, farriers led man into an age where medicine became integral to society. With an intimate working knowledge of horses, it is logical that farriers were the first shamans, from which two professions, vets and farriers, ascended.

As knowledge of medicine and science grew, a parallel course developed, with those who worked with iron developing the technical strength to meet the changing needs of the horse, whereas others followed a course of medicine and physiology, where they began to treat and prevent the ills that plagued civilization. The real split came as horses were abandoned for automobiles, and farriery became a technology-driven means of expanding the Iron Age. Veterinarians became doctors concerned with herds of animals, or individual pets, whereas farriers became smiths, working under horses acquired for competition and pleasure and not work. The gulf grew until suddenly it seemed as though there was little reason for the professions to communicate.

After the Second World War, in an age of affluence, the horse sports suddenly became ascendant, and the remains of the Cavalry began to supply the U.S. Olympic Team with horses, riders, farriers, and veterinarians! Suddenly, a group of Army veterinarians started the AAEP, and a bunch of Army farriers began to teach a new generation of students the secrets of an ancient craft. My first x-rays of a foundered foot were read to me by Sgt. Murphy, just after my first serious dissection classes, which were also led by him. And my grandfather, a retired Cavalry officer, was laughing all the way!
Today, after decades of revolutionary research into the anatomy, physiology, function, and pathology of the equine hoof, our two professions are closer than ever before to joining ranks and reaching an understanding of many of the fundamental pathologies of the equine foot.\(^1\) Both are driven by education and technology (Fig. 1). Many of our clients have come to expect and demand this relationship. We are now faced with the task of applying new volumes of knowledge at our disposal to relieving the pain of a lame horse and keeping a sound horses’ feet healthy—with appropriate technology. There is no better way to apply what we’ve learned than to work jointly in the cause of disease prevention and better hoof health. Applying farriery principles to our daily equine practice is now, more than ever, a service and benefit for our mutual clients and one from which we must not shrink (Fig. 2). Preventive medicine, diagnostic endeavors, and general lameness programs are all enhanced by including a “foot health” concept to our daily practice.

2. Three Ways to Enhance the Importance of Podiatry in Your Equine Practice

Recognize the Need for Communication/Cooperation

A common thread in equine lameness practice is that the marriage of podiatric lameness therapies and medical/surgical treatments is an uneasy one and that in many instances both fail because of improper application or use. We deal with farriers from a broad range of education, disciplines, geography, and client preference. Oftentimes, lameness that should respond to corrective or correct shoeing fails in the hands of farriers limited by experience, training, or availability. We have found that an expert-based training/consultation program is helping bring up our cadre of locally available qualified farriers. We can now count on a certain baseline level of ability from farriers who attend our “Podiatry Days” and work under the guidance of outside clinicians, who can help them provide appropriate therapies to specific clients of ours with specific problems.

Provide a Strong CE Opportunity for Your Own Staff and Farriers and Bring in a Clinician Well Versed in Farriery

This makes it more about learning and less about competition. We usually try to make all of our staff veterinarians available for the day, or most of it, so that we can all benefit from this training and the interaction. The farriers are asked to do the same, as well as to provide tools, forges, etc., for the consultant. “Sharing the Fire” is the result.

Involving Your Mutual Clients

A thorough knowledge of farriery provides an understanding of how to change and improve abnormal foot conformation such as the long toe, underrun heel, club foot, or sheared heel and to understand how to improve distal limb function. Last, it provides a basis to communicate with farriers and owners, allowing the veterinarian to have reasonable expectations of what a given farrier can or can’t do.

3. Podiatry Day at Our Practice

Education is the key to successful implementation of a podiatry program in any veterinary or podiatry practice, large or small. In a practice that sees large numbers of lame horses, it is axiomatic that between 70% and 80% of the cases will involve the foot in some respect. Therefore, adequate therapy will almost always involve some aspect of podiatry,
even if only in a supportive role. If one examines the number of lame horses seen a year and realizes how many you refer or pass along to a farrier, you can see that there is a powerful economic tool at hand. In our practice, we refer to several farriers locally or work with any farrier the owner chooses. We keep an active file of farriers for every situation. We attend local and national conferences on podiatry and speak when asked at meetings.

Every couple of months when specialists visit, we invite farriers to attend and participate with their client and horse. We provide food, work space, and ancillary services such as digital radiography, surgery, anesthesia, and a second opinion! These invariably become mini-seminars and group discussions.

There are three targets in a successful education program: veterinarian, farrier, and client. Each takes a specialized effort, and each must be approached somewhat differently. There are also three basic elements necessary to integrate such a program into a practice successfully: education, technology, and economics.

4. Education
Self-education is critical to the acquisition of adequate clinical knowledge and skills in daily practice. Although computer programs are available to analyze the angles and structural aspects of the foot, developing trained eyes and hands is necessary to look closely at hoof health.

Compare this with the often very short, intense, and anecdotal learning on most curriculums at farrier schools: heavy on the hammer and short on anatomy/physiology, with minimal hands-on experience. This is followed by an apprenticeship consisting of long, hard hours of repetitive learning at the hands of variably skilled instructors with lots of trial and error.

Client education is still the key to ultimate success, because they drive the demand for services and ultimately pay the bills. With Internet education, how-to horse magazines, and the information boom on us, there are readily available tools out there that, when harnessed properly, can be the backbone of and promote a good foot health program.

5. Technology
The rapid changes in technology have allowed us to suddenly do things to horse’s feet, both preventive and therapeutic, that were undreamed of a decade ago. Composites that allow us to bond an aluminum shoe to the hoof without nails are now commonplace and becoming better all the time. Simple wooden shoes allow us to treat many forms of laminitis. Alloys that absorb concussion, don’t remodel, and allow the foot to maintain its physiology are now in common use.

6. Taking Care of Business
We all need to make a living. Clients appreciate this but need education as to the value of our services.

Client perception of your own podiatry expertise and bias is an extremely important driver of your caseload! For example, there is much discussion about the return to a “Natural Hoof” but is this always appropriate? The Grand Canyon pack horse has different needs, housing, nutrition, genes, and environment than the average show or event horse compared with the dressage horse that is stabled most of the day (Fig. 3).

7. Conclusions
There is a lot of room for us to become, in our own practice, the central source of medical information regarding farriery and lameness. This takes a great amount of effort and a real “outreach” to clients and veterinarians, but it can be done with the one tool we use best, the acquisition and careful dispensing of information that can be assembled regarding the health of the foot. Veterinarians can and should participate in farrier education at both the national and local level. Attend and or speak at farrier symposiums. Realize that you don’t have to convince a national audience of your knowledge; the one client in front of you at any given time is plenty! Take time to talk to each other and discuss your ideas based on fact or clinical experience. Arrive at a goal, not a prescription engraved on a stone tablet—for example, “we’d like to see this horse grow a little more heel”—and then choose how to accomplish it. It is a good idea to be respectful in all discussions with people who carry hammers and bend iron for a living! All of us need to realize that there are probably more horses in the world today
that spend their entire working lives unshod and without the benefit of our combined expertise.

One must be aware of the latest in shoeing fads and realize that, whereas certain shoes are suddenly popular because they solve one type of lameness, they are not always a substitute for proven or tried and true methods.

References