

Telemedicine and the equine veterinarian

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“Hey doc, can you take a look at this for me?” As an equine veterinarian, you likely are asked this question daily. The request might come from a client or another veterinarian, but nowadays is frequently accompanied by an image on a cell phone or one delivered to your email inbox. You might be asked to give an opinion concerning a picture of a horse with a wound, a

video of a lame horse or a set

of radiographs. But in this increasingly digital age, does the ability to share medical information via the Internet come with any liabilities? Maybe...

At the heart of the matter is how we define telehealth, telemedicine and the veterinarian-client-patient relationship. The American Veterinary Medical Association uses the term telehealth to describe all forms of technology used to deliver health information or education. Telemedicine is the exchange of medical information regarding a patient via electronic communication within an established VCPR. Most states require a VCPR in order to diagnose, prescribe or treat an animal, and the veterinarian assumes responsibility for the medical care they provide. The AVMA encourages the use of technologies that help the veterinarian communicate with clients and support patient care. But without a VCPR, the AVMA cautions veterinarians to provide only general advice not specific to a patient, diagnosis or treatment.

For example, a client texts you an image of a laceration that you repaired three days earlier. The owner is seeking assurance that the wound is healing appropriately. Because you have a relationship with that client and recent experience with that particular patient, it's perfectly acceptable to give your opinion. If the image quality is poor, you might comment on the limitations of the image provided and insist on seeing the horse in person. But what if that same client sends you radiographs of her friend's foundered horse that was treated by another veterinarian and asks if you agree with the prescribed course of treatment? Because the owner hasn't asked you to examine the horse, you don't have a valid VCPR and shouldn't form a medical opinion about that case.

Consultation with other veterinarians is a different issue. Many of us have reached out to our colleagues for advice

on cases and used digital images or videos as part of that consult. The AVMA states that a veterinarian can consult with other professionals who are properly licensed in the state in which they reside. In such situations, these discussions are informal in nature and the consulting veterinarian has no medical responsibility toward the patient as no VCPR exists.

But in other situations, shades of gray exist concerning the liability of the veterinarian and interpretation of digital medical information. Let's take a common scenario regarding radiographs on a horse that recently underwent a prepurchase exam. Perhaps the original radiographs were taken in another country and sent in digital format. Perhaps the images have been compressed and there are specific views missing that you consider standard. While you did not perform any part of the prepurchase exam, you have been asked by the trainer to informally evaluate the radiographs. There are actually two issues at stake here: the radiographs and lack of a VCPR.

I asked several equine sports medicine specialists how they handle this scenario, and all agreed that it was steeped in murky waters. One area of concern was the actual radiographs. Most felt uneasy reading images that had previously been modified (such as compressed) or altered such that they could not magnify the image or change the contrast. Studies that did not include a complete set of views and proper labelling as to patient identity, date and view made interpretation more difficult. Furthermore, all recognized the inherent limitations of prepurchase examinations with regards to future soundness and expressed a desire to not judge the professional opinion rendered at the time. For these reasons, most veterinarians would, at best, provide only a verbal opinion on the radiographs in order to limit liability.

Telemedicine is likely to remain a part of the veterinary landscape. Currently, the AVMA provides guidelines for veterinary telemedicine at avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Telemedicine.aspx. Recommendations about teleradiology can be found on the American College of Veterinary Radiology's website at acvr.org/page/teleradiology-guidelines. These recommendations are specific for radiographs, CT, MRI and ultrasound images. They speak to the use of the DICOM format, image transfer and modification.

As with all new things, telemedicine will become better defined over time and take its place in our daily life as equine veterinarians.



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