

## Empowering our new colleagues: Ethical considerations for the modernization of equine internships

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There is much ongoing discussion about attracting and retaining equine practitioners as well as the paucity of applications for equine internship programs. There are multiple reasons for this, including financial constraints and generational differences in learning styles and lifestyle goals. While the reasons for this trend are multifactorial, what new thought processes can practices embrace to help shift this trajectory?



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Traditionally, many equine internships have not been run as structured programs, but rather as apprenticeships. These practices depend on individuals being eager to invest sweat equity and, in some cases, overwork themselves, emulating those who they worshiped as gods of equine practice. The model relies on learning by observation and

absorption of information with little expectation of positive reinforcement of the apprentice. Many of us have experienced and accepted this style as typical; in today's world, however, it is both ineffective and questionably ethical.

Our new colleagues entering equine practice today have had very different cultural and formative experiences. These experiences, magnified by technology and a constant stream of information, have instilled unique strengths, including an inclination to challenge the status quo. Questioning the methods that may contribute to our profession's historically high level of burnout and mental health issues makes sense regardless of career stage.

In a recent American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) survey of veterinary interns and residents, organizational culture appeared to be a large contributor to the wellbeing of early-career veterinarians, along with the quality of mentorship offered amongst other factors.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a starting goal is promoting a practice culture that encourages open modeling of our humanity. Mentors can commiserate that we struggle with imposter syndrome even once established in our careers. We wrestle with difficult cases but work through them using quality research and tapping of reputable sources. Mental health is a continuum that most of us are journeying through daily. Through the display of



humility, humanity and honesty, we help give mentees and interns the skills and space to process and meet many challenges in the future, understanding adversity will continually arise but can be overcome.

Fair and humane working hours should be promoted as the new normal for all members of equine practice. AAVMC guidelines can be utilized as a reference for setting fair expectations for both practice and intern.<sup>2</sup> Sleep deprivation leads to medical errors and safety concerns, as well as promoting a poor environment for learning. It is the expectation that interns will often work longer hours than what is typically expected of an associate to maximize the learning experience over a short period of time. Consider the analogy of the prospect horse in training—all the potential in the world, but limited experience requiring greater repetition for optimum performance in a short time frame. More seasoned horses may perform at a high level with less time spent training, as they have years of previous experience and skill. However, appropriate scheduling for allowance of rest and recuperation is essential for both young horses and intern doctors to avoid a shortened career span. Regardless of the schedule adopted, the goal should be to match the needs of the practice and the intern doctor concurrently while maintaining reasonable terms for both.

Mentors must learn to better utilize interns, making them a professional part of our team from the beginning. Why should we support stress and unnecessary toiling if a better way of learning and gaining experience is possible? If we have fewer internship applicants and fewer interns, we can still run an efficient practice by changing our model. Consider that additional support staff and better use of existing skilled technical staff could be promoted as a viable alternative. This enables interns to place more emphasis on learning the art of medicine both practically and emotionally while leaning on staff who have ongoing knowledge of hospital operations and culture. Internships should above all be an educational experience.

Effective mentoring certainly goes both ways. Both mentor and mentee need to be willing to rise to the challenge and actively work to accept and incorporate feedback. Interns

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