

## 'We've always done it this way'

By Caitlin O'Shea, DVM, MS, DACVS-LA, CVA



Dr. Caitlin O'Shea

The late United States Navy Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hopper once wisely stated, "The most dangerous phrase in the language is 'We've always done it this way.'" I am reminded of that adage almost daily in teaching bright, inquisitive third-year veterinary students, many of whom have minimal background in the horse world. They challenge me continually with their fresh approach to

the world, not only in our discussions of medical diagnostics and treatments, but also in our thought processes as equestrians.

I often ask them, "If it was a dog, what would you do?" and I frequently learn new things about clinical approaches that our colleagues in small animal medicine might employ. But the non-equine-oriented students in particular also do a fantastic job of questioning the status quo, which we who grew up with horses may have unwittingly become complacent to. I like to think that my contribution to them is meaningful in the realm of medical science, but perhaps I am even more grateful to them for the spillover of their enthusiasm and curiosity to my clinical practice.

Just because we've always done something "that way" doesn't mean it is current best practice—knowledge expands, techniques improve, theories fail and times change. The last paragraph of the oath we took when graduating from veterinary school pledges that we will "accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my [our] professional knowledge and competence" (AVMA, revised 2010).

Lifelong learning is our responsibility and our salvation: critical to the care of our equine friends and paramount to our personal well-being. A curious mindset can be a very effective antidote against the feelings of burnout that many of us struggle with at one time or another during our careers. Medical advances are being made in leaps and bounds, and I try to remind myself from time to time that the degree I received at graduation is really just a license to learn. I continue to learn every time I see a horse or talk to a client or referring veterinarian, and the day I stop doing that should be the day I retire.

I don't believe we should judge owners for not buying Ferrari-level care. They have their constraints, as do we all. But we do have an obligation to explain to them clearly the full extent of our capabilities as a professional team and to be advocates for the horse's well-being. Many are still surprised to learn how much better our diagnostic and treatment capabilities are today than they were even a decade ago. Retraining our clientele to understand that we can now obtain more accurate diagnoses and therefore create targeted treatment plans and achieve better outcomes in some cases, or catch potential problems before they become clinically problematic, is a continuing goal.

In the equine world, best practice and standard of care is fraught with many financial and logistical challenges our human clinical counterparts usually, thankfully, don't have to navigate in the United States. However, great strides can be made by communicating with, and recruiting as teammates, the others involved in our patients' care. When "it takes a village," our up-front workload might be greater, but in the end we're all happier, most importantly the horses.

Equine veterinarians largely consider we have each made it to where we are in part because of our tenacity, and most of us are very proud of that. It does take a special type of person—persistent and self-reliant—to survive the rigors of training and practice. However, we can and should learn to redirect our persistence toward building and training a collaborative team, rather than repeatedly pulling all-nighters alone.

For those of you who are unable to mentor students or interns daily, I urge you to avail yourself of those opportunities if they arise; and if you do already, stop to actively listen. At least take a moment right now (and regularly) to really think back and remember yourself as a third-year veterinary student. Why did you embark on this lifelong journey, this vocation? Yes, you have learned much and weathered a lot over the course of your career no matter its duration so far, but would the veterinary student you once were be proud of your work now?

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