Viewpoint

THE DREADED SHOEING PRESCRIPTION THUMBTACKED TO THE BOARDER BARN BULLETIN BOARD

Richard A. Mansmann, VMD, PhD

SUMMARY

Veterinarian/farrier/owner communication can be difficult in a given lameness case. A small group of veterinarians and farriers discussed the factors complicating this communication. Specific definition of roles; professional respect; differences in required education; distance and driving to horse, fees, and licensure requirements were cited as the primary complicating factors. In conclusion, the group suggested the ideal communication for a specific lameness case was for the veterinarian, farrier, and owner to be present when shoeing was being planned. A telephone call would be second in preference and a written case summary was the third choice. There are suggestions on how to formulate the written summary.

INTRODUCTION

A few decades ago, I started to hear farriers expressing discontent about veterinarians who used a third party to transmit their ideas about shoeing a particular horse, whether that third party be an owner or a barn's bulletin board. To the farrier, it meant that the veterinarian basically discounted the farrier's role and experience with the horse's feet and the previous findings of the farrier in relation to that specific horse's feet. It also often puts the owner in a precarious position, between the veterinarian as the diagnostician and the farrier as the shoer of their horse.

Even before I went to veterinary school in 1964, 1 recognized that the only way many soundness problems could be resolved in a particular horse was to have some form of interaction and consensus between the veterinarian and the farrier. Since that time, even though my medical interests have been extremely diversified, one of my educational interests that has been consistent for 30 years is the veterinarian, farrier, and owner interaction. Approximately every other year in the 1980s, the Santa Barbara Equine Practice annual seminars involved farrier and veterinarian joint topics. Since 1993, here in North Carolina, we have put together a Preventive Foot Care Program[1] that has been helpful to owners, farriers, and veterinarians. Three years ago we also started monthly farrier rounds in which local farriers discuss various cases within our practice. In December of 2001, Dean Oscar Fletcher asked me to organize the Equine Health Program at the College of Veterinary Medicine at North Carolina State University. Currently, I am part-time director of that program while still continuing my equine sportsmedicine practice. The topic of the April 10th, 2002 farrier rounds was how to improve communication between farriers and the equine faculty at North Carolina State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The group was typical in size for our monthly farrier rounds and extremely interactive for the 2 hours. The participants were Drs. Karl Bowman, Mat Gerard, and Dick Mansmann, from the NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine; 3rd year veterinary student, Bob Agne; farriers, Jim Clemente, Loren Griggs, Joel Hunt, Jerry Langdon, Billy Pope, Mike Stine; and research/clinical nurse from the UNC School of Medicine, Linda Mansmann.

HOW HAS HUMAN MEDICINE DEALT WITH THIS PROBLEM

In the discussion, Linda Mansmann, who has been involved in a nursing career that has spanned more than 3 decades, gave a brief overview. In the past, the physician was the only medical team member who wrote notes. Now, however, all the paraprofessionals, including nurses, physiotherapists, and so on, have licenses. Each of these professionals makes their assessment and then provides notes related to the case and the patient's record. Licensure makes professionals legally accountable for their specific actions. Now all team members have mutual respect for each other basically because licensure has forced a thorough defining of the individual professional's role in patient care and case management. Also, each professional is overseen by potential legal action from the patient's attorneys. Linda said that what was the "fantasy of the medical team approach in the 80s," now has occurred.

FACTORS INVOLVED WITH THE VETERINARIAN/FARRIER COMMUNICATION PROBLEM

The following are a list of factors that the group believed were involved with the problems related to the veterinarian/farrier communication about a specific ease.

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0737-0806/02/2207-0002$35.00/0

doi:10.1053/jevs.2002.36752

Definition of the Roles

It was believed that quite often there is a blurring of the roles, when the veterinarian is overstepping and telling the farrier how to shoe the horse and also often times, the farrier is stepping into the diagnostic aspects of telling the owner what is wrong with the horse. The group believed that the veterinarian should be the diagnostician and the farrier should be the person who designs and applies the foot protection (or shoe).

Respect

It was simply put by Joel Hunt, "treat and act professionally towards each other and all communication problems would be resolved."

Education

Veterinarians have an accredited program and board examinations that must be passed to become veterinarians. Farriers have free choice to their education. However, it was pointed out that the amount of time dedicated to foot problems of the horse in a typical veterinary college curriculum is measured in hours versus days and weeks. Karl Bowman pointed out that this brief time that is spent teaching about foot care in the horse in the typical veterinary curriculum probably will not increase in the future. However, Mat Gerard and Bob Agne added that there are elective courses, work-study programs, and externships that can enhance a specific veterinary student's interest in farriery if they so desire. These types of educational opportunities will be on the increase and certainly help to improve the veterinary/farrier relationship. Veterinary student, Bob Agne, who had been a trainer as well as a farrier before going to veterinary school, believed that a significant problem could well be understanding each professional's language.

Driving Time

Both professions commute a great deal between their clients. This driving time is unavailable, hands-on professional time. Also as anti–cellular phone use whiledriving laws become more popular, there is a chance of diminishing calling opportunities during driving for both veterinarians and farriers to discuss a specific case. Linda Mansmann pointed out that the various paraprofessionals around the physicians were and are in close proximity to the physician's office and this has historically, and currently, made their communications a lot easier.

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Fees/Time

Perceived or otherwise, both farriers and veterinarians say they are not paid for this communication time. Personally, it is my opinion that fees are strictly between the individual as the professional and the client. If charges are not made, that is only the fault of the professional. Quite frequently, either a veterinarian or farrier can be heard saying, "It takes time to communicate, and I am busy; besides I am not getting paid for this time."

Differences in Licensure and Its Requirements

Veterinarians all must have a license to practice. However farriers do not need a license. Licensure requirements for veterinarians primarily dictate the type of initial and ongoing education a veterinarian has to have, but also there are some specific licensure requirements, primarily related to recordkeeping and confidentiality.

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RECORDKEEPING AND MEDICAL CONFIDENTIALITY

A veterinarian records their findings when he/she is examining a horse for a lameness problem according to the requirements of their license. "Record their findings" means the veterinarian needs to write down briefly the history and what was done during the examination, such as hoof testing, various flexion tests, and nerve block results. Findings from additional diagnostics, such as blood work and radiographs, should also be recorded, concluding with the diagnosis of the problem. Then a treatment plan is evolved, written down, and put into action. For example, the amount of medication and the number of days a medication has to be given. Then frequently there is a recording (communication) related to shoeing of the horse. All of these items make up a medical record.

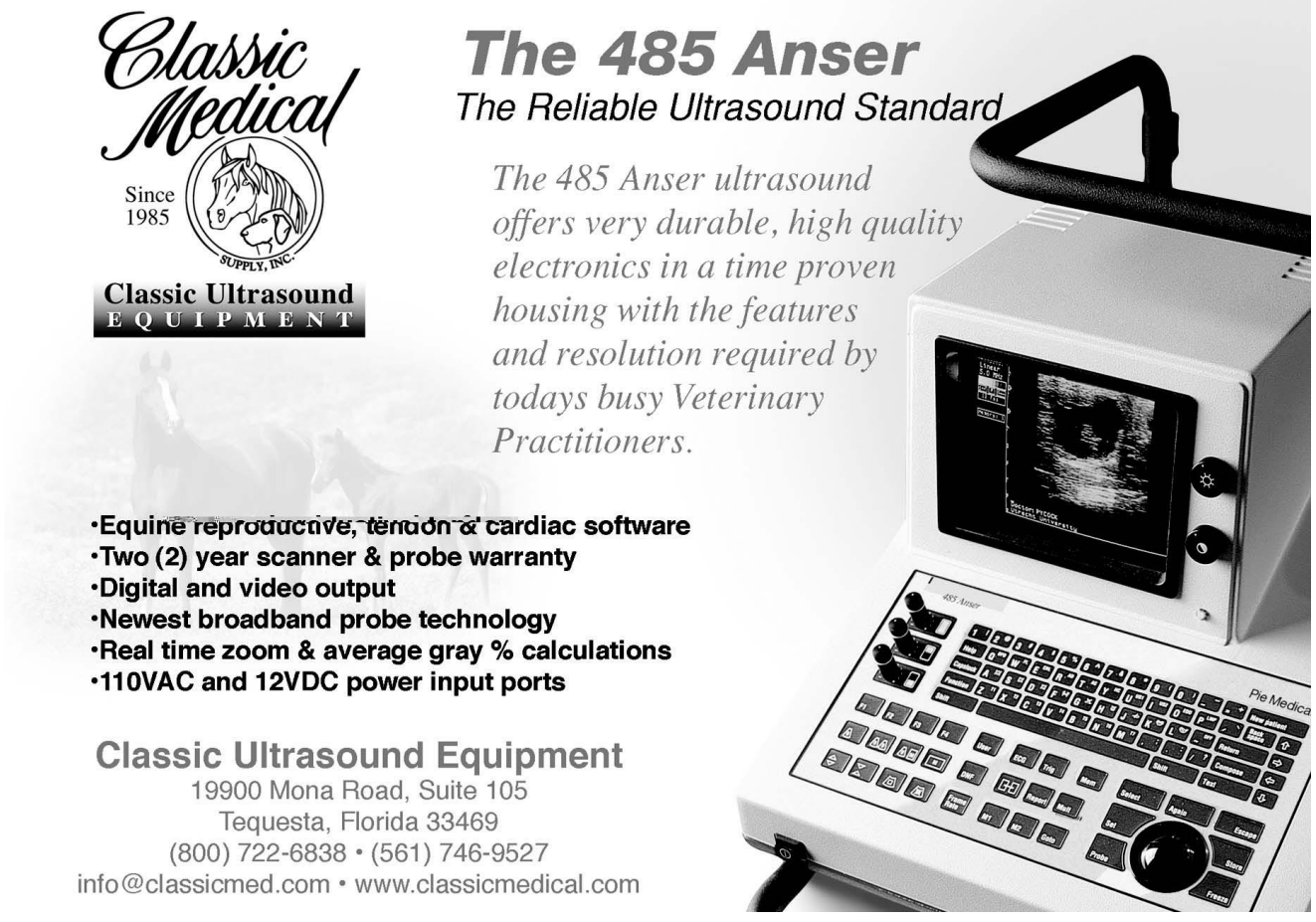
This information in a written form has to be maintained in the veterinarian's file for several years. This information cannot be given to anyone without specific permission from the owner of the horse at the time the examination was done. The state law related to the veterinarian's license requires maintaining these written notes and this confidentiality. This specific veterinary license requirement was a revelation to several of the farriers that were in attendance during this discussion. It has multiple implications to farriers.

Farrier and veterinarian communication, to a great extent does rely specifically on the owner's permission. For instance, if the owner is having some difficulty with the farrier at the time of the veterinary examination, and the owner does not want that information sent, there should be no communication.

It also points out the further importance for veterinarians and farriers to understand how they need to involve the owner in these communications.

When a farrier is feeling that they are left out of the communication loop, for instance as to what the diagnosis of the problem is, this may come from the veterinarian's (owner's) reluctance to pass on the information about a horse.

There is no requirement for client confidentiality in the farrier profession. For instance, if the veterinarian produces all the information above at the owner's request, will that farrier maintain that confidential information about the horse?



THE OWNER'S EXPECTATION OF THE VETERINARY/FARRIER RELATIONSHIP

One of the farriers, Jim Clemente, gave an excellent example of how owners can be caught in the middle of a lack of veterinarian/farrier communications. Jim likened it to a potential house buyer getting conflicting information from the real estate agent and the bank and each one insisting they have the correct answer. At some point in time, the owner out of pure frustration sits down and makes a decision. That decision may not be in the best interest of the horse and/or the veterinarian/farrier relationship.

There was some discussion as to which person the owner would fire first. The veterinarians thought it would be the veterinarian, and the farriers thought it would be the farrier. However, both agreed that the owners are put in a very tenuous and frustrating position.

CONCLUSION

The following is a summary of the conclusions of this eclectic group of how veterinarian/farrier communication for a specific case could be improved: (1) the best scenario is to have both the veterinarian and farrier working together at the same time with the horse and owner at the owner's invitation; (2) the second best is a telephone call initiated by either the veterinarian or the farrier, with the owner's permission, to discuss the case specifically; and (3) the third scenario is a bit more involved, when there is a transmission of a written case summary by the veterinarian.

The most important points in a written summary would be the following:

1. The veterinarian needs to get permission from the owner to send a copy of the veterinarian's examination notes, diagnosis, and shoeing ideas to the farrier.

2. Ideally, in these notes, the veterinarian makes a diagnosis, eg, chronic heel pain. Then the farrier shoes the horse with the style of shoeing with which he/she has had the most success, adapted to his/her previous experience with this particular horse for this particular problem

3. If the veterinarian wants to go further in his/her notes due to the complexity of the causes for the chronic heel pain, then the veterinarian should choose wording that indicates to the farrier that the veterinarian understands the veterinarian's role as a diagnostician and the farrier as the "shoer" and not a "carpenter." For example, "shoe with an eggbar" is not professional wording and is treating the farrier as a carpenter. "What do you think about an eggbar?" would be more professional terminology.

4. It would be appropriate then for the veterinarian to finish the note portion of the horse's record with "Call me (phone number) if you have a problem or questions."

5. For some specific reason that the veterinarian wants to use the farrier as a "carpenter," then the veterinarian should spell out in very specific detail what is desired in the shoeing and be prepared to stand behind the shoeing.

Two key comments kept coming up from both sides. Each professional should treat the other professionally. The other comment was that each person should recognize their specific role (ie, the veterinarian's role as a diagnostician and the farrier's role to deal with the mechanics of shoeing the horse). The better the veterinarian, the farrier, and the owner work with these concepts and put them into practice, the more likely the potential resolution of the lameness problem for the horse.

REFERENCE

1. Mansmann RA, King C, Stewart E: How to Develop a Preventive Foot Care Program- A Model. *Proc AAEP* 2000;46:156-161.

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