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Editorial

(De-)professionalisation

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"In New York State, the average period a family has horses is 5 years," **Harold Hintz** told his audience during the **Frank J. Milne Lecture** at the recent **AAEP convention** in San Antonio, Texas. *"It starts when the 13-year-old daughter finally has convinced her parents of her deep love for the equine species, and ends when at about 18 years of age she diverts her attention to other, mostly biped species"* (Hintz 2000). This pattern is not limited to New York State, or even to the US. It can be considered typical for most parts of the Western world.

The fact that many owners quit with their horses after a couple of years does not mean that the "market" shrinks. On the contrary, **for every leaver there are more newcomers and the equine population is still growing**. It does mean, however, that the **vast majority of horse owners** are very inexperienced with horses and will, on average, remain so. In the past, most horses were managed by people who had ample experience with the species, or at least with stock keeping in general: farmers, professional coach or cart drivers and of course the military. Nowadays, the few professionals that have remained (trainers of racehorses, professional riders of show jumpers, dressage horses and three-day-eventers and a few owners of large riding schools) care for a relatively tiny fraction of the population.

This **de-professionalisation of horse ownership** has important consequences for the equine veterinary profession. On the one hand, **people** are inclined to **spend more on their horses** and hence may facilitate the improvement of equine veterinary care. On the other hand, the **often anthropomorphic approach** and the expectations of some people of what may be repaired or solved, which are often more based on experiences with their cars than with living creatures, may from time to time drive the attending veterinarian to despair.

The **spread of horse ownership** under an **increasingly inexperienced population** has also led to a profound change in attitude of the society as a whole regarding the use of horses. Practices that were commonplace yesterday are questioned today and will be regarded as straightforward acts of barbarism tomorrow. The effects on equine welfare are ambivalent. Many of the old-fashioned horse people regard the increasing anthropomorphic approach as a sign of increasing softness of society and as a threat to the old hippiatric traditions. To a certain extent this may be true. However, in some cases it has halted, or will halt in the near future, **cruel practices** that had no other reason for existence than mere tradition. There is, for instance, no good argument nowadays to sustain the necessity of cutting the tails of draught horses, which is an act that without any doubt affects the horse's natural behaviour and thereby its welfare.

Repercussions of this development in society for the equine veterinary profession **are many**. We, as equine vets, are no longer just the "horse doctor" who comes in when the horse is ill or wounded. *Our task of educating the horse owner is increasingly important.*

Prevention of illness or injury by giving good guidance for equine health care and general management is much more important for equine welfare than trying to repair the damage once it has occurred. This is not our traditional role, but it is an important one. When society changes, we have to follow, whether we like the developments or not, as stopping these developments is beyond our power. Better still, **we should try to stay ahead of the developments** and try to adjust the direction. Equine welfare is an issue that will continue to increase in importance in the years to come.

No profession has a better starting point to claim the position of the chief protagonists of equine welfare than ours. However, to reach this position, we shall have to understand the signs of time: in our relation with the client, as pointed out above, but also **in our choice of research topics**. It is still useful and worthwhile to develop a new plate for long bone

fracture repair. The impact on equine welfare, however, is limited to a handful of individual cases. Recently, the attention of some larger research groups has focused more on issues **such as the influence of environmental conditions and management aspects** on the quality of the musculoskeletal system, and hence on injury resistance. This type of research may have a much wider impact and may, for instance, lead to a scientifically-based standpoint on the eternal question as to whether training at early age is good or detrimental for the horse (Smith *et al.* 1999), or on the **degree to which free (pasture) exercise** at young age is really necessary for the balanced development of the young horse (Barneveld and van Weeren 1999). One of the research aims of the recently formed *Global Equine Research Alliance* (GERA), the identification of molecular markers of early tissue damage (McIlwraith 2000), fits in this concept as well.

"*Times are a-changing*", sang Bob Dylan in 1965 when the Vietnam War was escalating and the Cold War was at its height. They did and they will remain doing so. The enormous changes in recent years in the role of the horse in society and the concomitant de-professionalisation of the ownership challenge the veterinary profession and ask for an even more professional, far-sighted and proactive attitude from our side. Only then can we make sure that we deserve the title of "*Guardians of the Horse*" (Rossdale *et al.* 1999), not only in the past and at present, but also in the future.

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