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### Horse Handling Techniques for Veterinarians and Owners

Equine veterinarians are at risk of serious injury when the 1,200-pound animals they're treating don't want to participate. We know, in fact, that their profession is one of the most dangerous around.

Gemma Pearson, BVMS, MRCVS, is a big proponent of safe and correct horse handling during veterinary exams. She demonstrated tactics for training horses to behave during common procedures at the 2015 International Society of Equitation Science Conference, held Aug. 6-9 in Vancouver, British Columbia. Pearson is a senior clinical training scholar in equine practice at the University of Edinburgh's Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, in Scotland.

"Almost all the unwanted behaviors we see as vets are a consequence of inadvertent negative reinforcement," Pearson said. "For example, if when you raise the vein of a needle-shy horse and he rears, you remove your hand. The horse is not being naughty, he's just repeating the behavior (rearing) that removed the hand last time. If, instead, you keep your hand on their neck until they stand still and relax (and then remove it for a second), they will stand still and relax next time they are nervous."

She said the three most important things to remember when handling horses for veterinary exams are correct application of negative reinforcement, learning to recognize signs of arousal (e.g., an elevated head position, tense muscles), and understanding how to properly shape behaviors. Then she encouraged individuals to rely on learning theory principles to complete the following procedures safely:

- **Using a stethoscope to listen to heart rate or gut sounds.** "Don't just walk up and slap the cold stethoscope on the horse," Pearson said. Approach the horse and stroke his neck or scratch his withers first. Then work your way down to the area you want to listen to.
- **Taking rectal temperature.** Horses are quick to clamp their tails between their legs and resist having their rectal temperature taken. So Pearson recommends scratching the hairless area around the horse's butt until he relaxes and raises his tail enough for you to slowly insert the thermometer and take his temperature.
- **Administering oral medications or dewormer.** Pearson said she starts by holding the syringe by the horse's cheek, and each time the horse lowers his head, she takes her hand away. This is a form of negative reinforcement, in which the handler removes the pressure (the syringe) when the horse performs the desired action (lowering his head, rather than raising it). She says she moves the syringe closer and closer to the horse's mouth and touches the corner of the horse's mouth and his lips with it a few times before actually administering the medication. If a horse is particularly adverse to this, Pearson says she might dip the end of the syringe in molasses first.
- **Giving a shot or vaccine.** Pearson suggests starting by having the handler back and walk the horse forward several times to not only ensure they have control of the horse, but to also distract him from the task at hand. Then scratch the neck and withers to encourage the horse to relax before moving to the jugular vein—or other area being injected—and scratching it vigorously to desensitize it. Similar to oral medication administration, Pearson places the syringe on the target area (while still scratching the horse's neck) and removes it each time the horse lowers his neck. Give the horse a couple-minute break periodically, she said. When the horse is calm and accepting of the syringe, administer the actual injection. "It typically takes 30 seconds to two minutes to work with a needle-shy horse," Pearson explained. "If you're not getting the response you want, you might be asking too much and need to take it back a step."

On the whole, veterinarians and handlers must avoid training a fear response into horses when they're working with them. Using negative and positive (in this scenario, give the horse a food reward immediately when he performs the desired action) reinforcement can help avoid this. Keep these principles in mind when asking a horse to perform any task.