Horse Pain and its Impact on Reproduction

Citing a clear correlation between lameness and fertility in cattle, she said there's something to be learned from observing pain in animals. Lameness has had a substantial impact on dairy cows' welfare and the producers' bottom line (research based on lameness in cows). Whether lameness is due to hormones causing opioid effects (based on research in sows). Humans and pigs have higher pain thresholds during late gestation in labor that reverse postpartum, which could extend far beyond the inciting incident. "Pain can come up, and you can't always figure out why," said Sanchez. "There are probably many causes of dysfunctional pain in horses on which we don't have a handle."

Pain can also multiply on itself; horses might experience a condition called neurologic windup, when the pain perception is amplified and spreads. This is analogous to the pain that often accompanies surgery or orthopedic injuries. Pain is experienced in different ways: physiologic, inflammatory, neuropathic, and dysfunctional. (Find a depth discussion on the depth of pain research and management on pain in other species.)

Sanchez described some of the pros and cons of each drug class, some of the combinations that seem to work best, as well as which ones appear most likely to cause more harm or little good.

The best place to start with the assessment is taking a thorough case history, noting that inherent differences in other species appear accurate and repeatable, even when performed by individuals with limited training or experience. Scientists working in the field are hoping to develop a similar scale for horses because these systems extend far beyond the inciting incident. "Pain can come up, and you can't always figure out why," said Sanchez. "There are probably many causes of dysfunctional pain in horses on which we don't have a handle."

"What seemed like a little thing to the owner was not a little thing to the horse," she said. "I take the history facing the horse, give him a chance to chill, and watch his interaction with the owner and environment (food withdrawal, anesthesia recovery, hospitalization, management)."

Next she conducts a comprehensive physical examination of "the whole horse, up and down and sideways," and event-by-event. Some signs and events she watches for:

- Vocalizing (excessive whinnying in a way that is unusual for a given horse);
- Stomping feet;
- More frequent "Momma" calling;
- Time spent with the head in a corner (whereas nonpainful horses would be at the window or front of the stall more frequently);
- More frequent rolling in the stall or lying on a wall;
- Less interaction with the owner when faced in the barn;
- Changes in the horse's gait, weight bearing or head carriage;
- Lameness itself;
- Posture (a horse's posture can tell you a lot about his pain); and
- Change in behavior and eating habits.

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