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Referring Vets' Expectations of Equine Referral Centers

Your veterinarian is an integral part of your horse's care team, and you value his or her opinion on how to keep your horse in the best health possible. But, at some point, your horse might need care that your primary practitioner can't provide—maybe advanced imaging or colic surgery—or your veterinarian might want to have another professional take a look at a challenging case. At that point, they might send the patient to a referral center or specialist.

What do these referring veterinarians expect from specialists and referral centers, and what aspects of that relationship facilitate a positive outcome when sending patients to another vet?

Colleen Best, DVM, a PhD candidate in the University of Guelph's Department of Population Medicine, worked with Jason Coe, DVM, PhD; Joanne Hewson, DVM, PhD, Dipl. ACVIM; Michael Meehan, BVSc, BSc (Hons), PhD; and David Kelton, DVM, PhD, MS, at Ontario Veterinary College to investigate interpersonal relationships between clients, veterinarians, and referral centers in equine veterinary practice. They shared some of the results of their study in a poster presentation at the 2015 American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine Forum, held June 4-6 in Indianapolis, Indiana.

"Over the past several decades, there has been an increase in the number of referral centers and in clients' access to them," the group noted. This has affected the quality of care patients receive. Better access to such facilities, for instance, means more owners have opportunities to pursue treatments veterinarians can't conduct in a field setting, have advanced imaging techniques performed, and more.

But referral clinics' accessibility can also present a unique challenge: It adds more cooks to the kitchen, so to speak. And, while all veterinarians ultimately have the patient's best interest in mind, they might not all take the same route to get there.

"Research in companion animal practice has shown that referring veterinarians (rDVMs) and specialists perceive aspects of referral care differently, including the timing and amount of communication that occurs between them," the group said.

So, Best and colleagues set out to explore rDVMs' expectations of specialists and referral centers. The team hosted six discussion groups, each including seven to nine referring veterinarians (for a total of 11 men and 37 women that had been in practice for one to 46 years), from which they collected and analyzed the participants' input.

"The overarching theme of participants' discussions was that the specialist and referral center should act as an extension of the care the referring veterinarian provides to their clients and patients," the team summarized in their poster. "The relationship that participants had with their clients was a significant driver of their expectations of the specialist and referral care."

They said they attributed this to the importance veterinarians place on their relationship with their client and their need to ensure that they can advocate for the client and horse throughout the referral experience.

The team explained that rDVMs said they wanted to remain involved with their patients' care when referred to a specialist to:

- Ensure the patient received appropriate care in consideration of the horse's history and context;
 - Ensure the care and treatments they requested were performed;
 - Reduce the potential for repetition of work they've already done;
 - Prevent additional costs to the horse owner;
 - Improve the patient's outcome; and
 - Most importantly, to have the referral experience positively impact their relationship with the client.
- The relationship between the referring veterinarian and the specialist was important to how effectively the referral achieved a positive outcome: "Participants spoke about desiring mutual respect, collegiality, professionalism, and trust in the relationships they had with specialists," the research group reported. "Communication played a central role in many of the positive experiences participants shared, and it was perceived to be an essential component of the referral process."

The team noted that they also considered the context and boundaries of the referral. Their study results indicated that some rDVMs did express frustration and displeasure about referral practices that competed with their practice and/or solicited their clients.

The study's overarching concept was that "strengthening the relationship of referring veterinarians and specialists has the potential to improve the referral process, as well as patient and client outcome."

As one study participant noted, "If all of us can get together—the referral vet, the vets and the referral center, and the owner—and the more information we have, I think the better choices will be made for that individual animal."