

## **Relationships in Practice: The Dynamics of Success**

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### **Introduction**

The Equine Clinic at OakenCroft is a general equine practice located in upstate New York. Our eight doctors service performance horses (hunters, jumpers, dressage, saddleseat, western pleasure and performance, driving, drafts), broodmares, pleasure horses, and pets. While most of the practice is ambulatory, covering twelve counties in two states, we do have a modest surgical facility and hospital space, as well as facilities for housing 60 foaling mares and performance broodmares.

In order for any practice to keep such a complex infrastructure in working order it is mandatory that you have a good working relationship with and an educational program for your clients. Many existing practices (ours included) have developed these formats through trial and error. Having been in practice for over 30 years with 20 different veterinarians in three practices serving thousands of clients and tens of thousands of horses has afforded me ample opportunities to witness, commit, and omit a myriad of approaches to client relationships and education. I encourage you to ponder, dissect, edit and modify my ideas as they may apply to you.

Upon graduation you will possess a knowledge base larger than any group of students before you. You will have been exposed to the latest diagnostic and therapeutic techniques. Your scientific and clinical education has been produced by the best and the brightest our profession has to offer. You are ready to descend on the world dispensing knowledge, healing horses, and being viewed as a minor god by hoards of devoted clients! The real world may be slightly different. Your first position is the place where your ideals (which by the way I believe to be true and applaud) intersects with reality. The key here is how you respond to this situation based on your relationship with yourself, with horses, with Veterinary Medicine, with your colleagues, with your lay staff, and finally with your clients. Make note of the order these relationships take; You may be most impacted by your relationship with your clients, but unless you have some grasp of the more basic relationships on the list, you will not be able to effect the desired endpoint.

### **Relationship with Oneself (Self Awareness)**

This is the fundamental relationship that is common to all our interactions with others throughout our lives. It is the foundation upon which all other relationships are built. If we neglect to build this as a solid foundation, we are predestined to failure. It is also the most difficult relationship we will ever cultivate. The truly self-aware person is completely honest with themselves without being hypercritical. They have the confidence to see themselves as they actually are, accept that for the time, and move on from a position of knowledge and strength. To ignore your strong points is to sell yourself short and lower your self-esteem. You wouldn't be where you are right now if you did not have a lot of great things going for you, so don't be afraid to embrace them. To ignore your weak points is to make you

vulnerable to errors, and stifle your true growth. You can't fix something until you know that it is broken. You won't know that it is broken if you are afraid to look. Find any honest, successful person in any field and ask them about their mistakes and failures. I'm sure they can identify them, and outline how they overcame them. Ask any total failure what their shortcomings are, and they will be much more likely to tell you "it's all somebody else's fault".

There is an exercise many people employ to facilitate this process. It will only be helpful for you if you approach it quietly, willingly, honestly, maturely, and bravely. Make a list of 5-10 personality traits that you possess that are positive (optimistic, humble, nurturing, fun-loving, dedicated...) Then list 5-10 personality traits that you possess that are negative (inpatient, rude, sarcastic, spiteful, lazy...) Nobody's going to collect this list, so lay it all out in dazzling honesty. Look at the positive list. Know those things about yourself and feel good about them. Celebrate them without conceit and share them without hesitation. Look at the negative list. Accept that they are true, determine if you have the desire to change them, and do so. Do not condemn yourself in the process. To do so is to admit that you cannot grow from where you are now. We all can grow.

Positive

Negative

Now let's apply the same format to your skill as a Veterinarian. Make a list of those things you are confident you can do, and a list of those things that you feel uneasy with. For example, how are you with lameness work-ups? Can you tell which leg the horse is lame in? Do you know the anatomy well enough to examine the leg? What about proficiency doing nerve blocks? Taking and reading radiographs? Ultrasounds? Thermography? Scintigraphy? Joint injections? Surgical corrections? Shoeing recommendations? Exercise regimens? Therapeutic options? Prognostication for use? These are all things the client wants to know. Your job is to determine without prejudice what you do know

and what you don't know. Celebrate and utilize those you have mastered. Identify those you are less than proficient at, and determine if you want to change them. If so, go ahead and work toward improving your skills in that area. If not, be honest about it, and don't fool yourself, your colleagues or your clients about your status. To do less than this will obviously make you vulnerable to errors (misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatments), and will prevent you from ever gaining proficiency in these areas. (There will be more on this in the section on Client Relationships below). It is only through this type of self-evaluation that you grow.

Mastered Skills

Skills to Be Developed

New graduates often feel that they have to “do it all” and “know it all” in order to gain respect and self esteem. I have bad news... you can't. As confidence levels grow, we all find areas we excel at and are interested in and concentrate our efforts in these areas. We become confident about our talents and our shortcomings. Nobody expects an orthopedic surgeon to be good at reproductive physiology. We don't go to a radiologist to get our blood-work evaluated. Nor do we ask the ophthalmologist about pre-racing horses. Instead we are grateful for the talents and skills any of these individuals have and would never expect them to perform outside of their field.

Don't make this an excuse for not trying to improve your practice, but at the same time don't delude

yourself either. If you hate doing rectals, you should probably become aware of that fact before you take on a broodmare position because you think the foals are cute.

This brings us to one final listing in self-awareness. What do I need/want to live and what can I expect from Equine Veterinary Medicine? Making this list will take you some serious time. You have to calculate student loan payments, cost of living, personal free time, professional gratification, personal gratification, family issues, moral implications, quality of life, work hours, work conditions, horse values, level of sophistication of practice, geography, climate, and finally “Gone Fishing” time. Take the time to write down your needs (those things that you have to have...loan payments, time off, family issues, basic cost of living). Next list those things you want (nice car, grand prix horse and time to compete, two weeks skiing each winter). Remember, you really should be in a spot where your true needs will be met before any of your wants.

Needs

Wants

You can only know if you can have these things and be the Veterinarian you envision if you know the realities of practice. You can only know the realities of practice if you have been exposed to them with the same honesty that I’ve asked you to evaluate yourself with. That means you have to spend some time in type of practice you plan on entering. Don’t assume that a small group ambulatory practice will be anything like a referral hospital practice, or that a race track practice will be at all similar to a broodmare practice. I’m not trying to infer that one is inherently better than another, but be assured that they are different, and your gifts, skills, and expectations may fit much better with one practice than another. The only way to find out is to become aware of your gifts, skills and needs, and explore through first hand experience (jobs, externships) what is right for the “you” that you now know.

For further study in this area I would recommend “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen Covey. His seminars have been enjoyed and well utilized by many of the leaders in Equine

Veterinary Medicine.

### **Relationship with Horses**

The next block in building a client relationship is to build a relationship with horses. Many equine practitioners enjoy some degree of innate rapport with horses. They can appreciate a horse's value not only as a star athlete in a given discipline, but also as a living creature irrespective of its financial value. That's not to say that we are all RMM or Baxter Black, but it is to your advantage to have an easy comfort level with your patients. Clients are quick to dismiss people that lack basic horse skills, or are fearful or abusive of their animals. There is probably no other field in Veterinary Medicine that requires the doctor to have as an intensive working knowledge of the horse's defined job in order to effectively treat the patient. Client acceptance is greatly influenced by their perception of your talents in areas that they can measure at a glance, such as horsemanship.

At the same time, equine practices are filled with great practitioners that did not "grow up with horses". There are plenty of successful equine veterinarians that came to the equine world with little horse experience, did a good job, won clients and healed horses.

"Horse sense" is not the type of thing you learn from reading or going to school. It is the type of thing that you get to learn by doing. The most successful practitioners I know enjoy some aspect of the horse industry outside of Veterinary Medicine. While it is reasonable to have a career in equine practice without a deep horse background, your career will be aided and enriched if you participate at some level.

If you need further help in this area, I would suggest that you immerse yourself in a variety of horse disciplines. Take a few lessons, watch some competitions, ask questions, learn the lingo, find out what it is that excites the clients and enjoy the horses for what they are.

### **Relationship with Working Veterinary Medicine**

The next block in your foundation for a client relationship is to have a working knowledge of veterinary medicine. The formal education you are receiving in Veterinary School is just the beginning of your mastering Working Veterinary Medicine. The charge the school is dedicated to fulfilling is to expose you to a wide range of anatomical, physiological, pathological, diagnostic and therapeutic conditions that will serve you well on the cutting edge of Veterinary Medicine. You are graduating with knowledge that did not exist for last year's class, let alone those of us that have been in practice for some time. It is this information that will continue to advance the level of care we offer to our clients and their horses. Don't be stingy with this information. It is one of the great strengths new graduates bring to established practices.

Let's go back to the second self-awareness list that you made (Veterinary Skills). Proficiency in certain day-to-day skills improves your value to the practice and facilitates your acceptance by clients. The following is a short, and incomplete list of skills that new associates in general practice should master.

1. Examinations (physical, respiratory, colic, lameness, prepurchase, foaling mare, neonatal foal, ophthalmology, dermatology, neurologic, and cardiac).
2. Diagnostic modalities (taking and reading radiographs, tendon and soft tissue ultrasound, abdominal

- taps, thoracic taps, spinal taps, EKG, rectal palpation/abdominal anatomy, post-mortems, endoscopy)
3. Reproductive skills (working knowledge of physiology, hormonal therapy, uterine and ovarian exams with and without an ultrasound, cultures, cytologies, lavages, caslicks, uterine biopsy, semen collection and evaluation)
  4. Basic laboratory skills (CBC, chemistries, blood gases, electrolytes, fecals, cultures, cytologies, gram stains, Ig). Not only should you have a grasp of when these test are indicated, but you need to know how to perform them at some level and how to apply the results.
  5. Technical skills (**pull a shoe**, auscultation, percussion, bandaging, dentistry, nasogastric intubation, nasolacimal flush, epidural, catheter placement, IM injections, IV injections, nerve block, joint taps, anesthetic monitoring and administration, fluid selection and maintenance)
  6. Preventative Medicine (design and implementation of parasite control and vaccines, housing evaluation, ventilation, nutrition)
  7. Surgical skills (laceration repair especially eyelids, nostrils, and limbs; Minor soft tissue procedures such as herniorrhaphy, castrations, and dermal biopsy. (Advanced surgical skills for those practices that perform them as a routine would be great, but let's get the basics first).
  8. Dentistry (dental exams, normal anatomy and development, common problems, routine maintenance, sedation, hand tools and power tools)
  9. Recognition and ability to treat routinely occurring conditions (COPD, foot abscess, viral respiratory disease, medical colics, laminitis, hives, splints, tendon injuries, chronic heel pain, DJD, uveitis, ocular ulcers, gastric ulcers, enteritis, practical pharmacology)

Before the outcry begins that you haven't mastered all these things and that therefore Veterinary School has failed you miserably, let me make a few observations. There is no way that a Veterinary School in four years can teach all its students the required science that they need plus make all students proficient in all areas from equine to dairy to beef to canine to feline to small ruminant to avian to aquatic to lab animal. To that species list add such clinical specialties as medicine, surgery, reproduction, anesthesiology, nuclear medicine, ophthalmology, dermatology, and complementary therapies. This is one of those places where, if we are honest with ourselves, ideals and reality intersect, and probably not in a very friendly fashion.

What you can do however is to take some responsibility for and control over your education. If you are certain that you are going into an exclusively equine practice and would never leave it due to injury, loss of limb, allergies to horses, changing demographics etc. you could just slide by the other stuff with the minimum effort needed to pass and really concentrate on horses. (I don't recommend this...I was supposed to be a dairy practitioner. Several prominent equine practices were started as a "sideline" to the owner's thriving food animal or small animal practice. Finally, people become injured and still need to make a living within a less physical aspect of the profession).

A more moderate approach would be to proactively intensify your equine experience. Seek out faculty with expertise and interest in areas you are concerned about. Put together a plan that can be implemented by students with a minimum of cost. Be creative. Explore your student AAEP chapter. Colic crews and palpation teams are available at many colleges. Routine work and dental care for school-owned horses have to be provided by somebody, why not students? I think that if you take a positive, helpful, non-judgmental approach to these and other creative solutions you will be pleasantly surprised by the response on the faculty and staff. Conversely, if you go to the Dean with a chip on

your shoulder and demand action from a dedicated faculty that is already working close to maximum potential, don't expect much to happen.

Seek out externships in your free blocks that will let you see and do a fair amount of the routine things listed above. (Note on externships: They are great opportunities to see things and be seen. Many referral practices hire their interns from their extern pool. If you are looking to go into general practice however, I would encourage you to visit general practices during your externship, as much of the referral work you see will not be much different from the caseload you will be exposed to in the university hospital).

Find a mentor in practice, somebody that will take you in hand and help you with these areas. Ask if you can practice scanning tendons on her old broodmare. Are there any horses on the farm you could follow the cycles on? Would it be all right if you blocked out that retired field hunter with Navicular Disease? Offer to take radiographs. Get the catheter stuff all ready and the neck prepped, and don't be afraid to ask to place it. If you don't ask, you won't know. These people do exist, but it is up to you to find them. Start with the faculty and the AAEP office for help.

At this point the reality of the situation is that many new graduates are still seeking another year of training and mentoring after graduation before working independently. This has been the case in human medicine for years (and they only have a single species to worry about!). In the last few years the concept of enrolling in an internship instead of applying for an associate position has become the norm for new graduates going into the equine field. The AAEP Avenues Program is making it easier for practices and students to find a program that fulfills everyone's needs and expectations. There are internship evaluations and "word of mouth" history on the value of various internships around the country. Read about them on-line. Question the current and previous interns. Ask trusted faculty members for input. Visit or enroll in an externship or preceptorship there during your third or early fourth year. Be sure that it is truly a learning experience and not just a lower paying job. An internship does not pay as well as an associate position, but this deficit is rapidly overshadowed by the positive long-term impact on skills and salaries. The AVMA data consistently reports a much higher earning potential for equine practice as compared other clinical areas. Many financial institutions recognize this as a necessary part of your education, and as such are willing to wait until after the internship for payments on student loans.

Once you are in a practice, continue to do these same sorts of things. Be honest with your employer and yourself about your weak areas, and outline a plan to attack them. Arrange to take practice radiographs and scans, follow a friend's mares to hone your palpation skills, go to a training center early in the morning and jog horses. Be energetic about it, and you will find it seldom refused.

Subscribe to any of the clinical listserves (AAEP, ECN, Therio...)and sort through the copious information presented.

Later, go to as many continuing education sessions as you can. Look at the front row of any national conference, and you will find the best and the brightest Veterinarians we have to offer taking notes and asking questions. You can be sure that they never are satisfied with the education that is offered, but rather that they are always pushing for more.

Granted, these parts of your education come at a great expense to your free time, but they will be worth it. Lyle Sussman is a motivational speaker that the AAEP has presented a number of times. One of his take-home messages is that we all get exactly what we deserve in this life. If all you do to get your education is go to class, that is the education that you will get and you deserve to get that education! If you look for the opportunities to do more, sacrifice for the sake of learning, and go the extra mile, you will get a much different education, and you will deserve it!

### **Relationship With Your Colleagues**

On the next level is your relationship with other Veterinarians in your practice, your practice area, and throughout the country. Be aware that everybody is capable of learning something from everybody else. Be a sponge for new information. Take it in, analyze it, discuss it with others, and make it a part of your knowledge base or discard it if you find it lacking.

Treat these people as you wish to be treated. We are in a small group, and will often have exchanges with others locally or across the nation. Veterinary Medicine is a profession, and we are expected to act professionally. When someone goes out of their way to malign a neighbor, or undermine them with their clients, it speaks very badly of the whole group. We should be able to seek and give second opinions without a sense of anger, fear, or superiority. Think for a moment of the family pediatrician. If every time the neighboring doctor's name came up in conversation your doctor put him down, you might be slightly annoyed at his lack of professionalism. You may even look for another doctor that was more secure than the one always taking potshots at another professional that many of your friends and neighbors trusted completely.

Avoid bean counting. If you spend an inordinate amount of time comparing your hours to an associate's or the quality of your caseloads, you will most likely become bitter and will not effectively change the thing that you perceive as unfair. If after an honest evaluation you see a real trend developing, the situation should be discussed with those people and only those people who have the authority to analyze and rectify the situation. Griping and acting sullen are very ineffective methods for facilitating changes. Rational discussions and reason work much better.

New graduates often have a feeling of being overworked. Add to this the feeling of frustration that things didn't go smoothly or worse yet the client was less than pleased that the "new kid" was sent out. I will be the first one to agree that inexperienced associates take much longer to get some things done than others. Likewise the guttural pouch you flushed for the first time alone didn't go as smoothly as when the practice owner did it yesterday and the horse got a bloody nose, and the client screamed at you to get out of the barn. This is another one of those places where reality and ideals intersect with less than a graceful outcome. May I suggest that the reality is a Constant. It was the same for me twenty years ago. It was the same for my first boss twenty years prior to that, and it will be the same for your new associates twenty years from now. I don't expect everything to go smoothly for recent graduates, so why should you? Hang in there.

What is expected however is that you are honest with yourself and point out where you are having trouble and to ask for help. A smart employer doesn't want you in over your head because there can be no good that can come of that situation for you or the practice. When there are client problems, be sure

to report them so that they can be dealt with in the appropriate manner. If you feel that the actions taken were not appropriate, it is imperative that you discuss the matter calmly and quietly. Apply the same dazzling honesty to your work setting as you applied to your personal traits. Try to see the other side. Be aware that your actions may have had ramifications that you cannot fathom, but that the practice manager is dealing with for you. Don't be petty or be drawn into petty arguments.

Good communications are as essential to group management as total honesty is essential to personal management. Just as you will not continue to grow unless you come to recognize your shortcomings, professional relationships will not grow unless somebody talks about the problems. Your employer may readily agree that your concerns are valid and deem action, but they are just as likely to go on in oblivion if you do not say something. Many practices hold staff meetings where everybody has "permission to speak freely". If not, you can always schedule a time to discuss your concerns. Many disputes can be headed off by being clear about your responsibilities to and expectations of the practice. Contracts are routine, and they exist for the well being of all parties involved.

If problems continue, evaluate the root causes. Did you make the wrong career choice, and really don't feel good about being an equine practitioner? Are your skills sufficient for the job, or should you spend some additional time in a setting with more supervision? Are your associates people whom you will never be compatible with in any setting? (Note: It is not always necessary to place blame in situations such as this, but only to recognize the reality of incompatibility). Does your employer really want to hear your side, or do they just want you to do the work and be quiet? Do your morals, ethics, lifestyle, and expectations coincide with those of the practice? Determine whether you have any real power to effect change in that setting. If you feel over time that there is not going to be a certain level of trust between you and the practice, my advice is to fulfill your obligations and then move on in a professional manner.

### **Relationship with the Lay Staff**

The next building block is your relationship with the lay staff. Be aware that very often the motivation of staff members to perform their duties well is not solely for financial rewards. They are often motivated by a concern for the patients, dedication to the practice, and bonds with the clients. Many of them will have been with the practice for longer than some of the Veterinary staff, and the clients see them as a source of continuity. The office manager is the person with the answers. The receptionist that consistently answers their calls is viewed as the advocate for their horse health concerns. The book-keeper that justly deals with billing situations is considered to be honest and precise. The techs are the people that care for the hospital horses compassionately and tirelessly. The barn workers are the ones that keep the place clean, help them back their trailers and load their horses. The clients view them as much a part of the practice as any doctor, especially one without nearly as much seniority. The senior members see them as the folks that have stuck with it through thick and thin.

It is well accepted that a friendly, competent office staff has a monumental affect on the success of the practice. At the same time, rude, lazy, sullen folks are poison. If the staff enjoys a good relationship with you, they will be quick to go the extra distance for you. If they have confidence that you are talented and hardworking, they will be sure the clients see things that way as well. Conversely, if you leave the staff feeling abused and misused, the clients are likely to hear in their tone that you are less than stellar.

Be aware that most staff members want to support you, but you must make that possible for them to do. Consider an example: A client calls and asks that you call back to discuss a given problem. The receptionist passes this along to you, but you take no action. The next day the client calls again, comments that they called yesterday, and they still need to talk to you. The staff person reminds you and you promise to call. Day three dawns with the client calling in a huff complaining that you haven't called back, and lets the receptionist have an ear full. Now, if this is a one time only deal, the receptionist is likely to explain that things are busy, and that she will really work on getting the client a reply ASAP. If however, this is a common theme, eventually their support for you to the clients will diminish.

The staff already has a tremendous loyalty to the practice and the clients, and they are hoping that you will give them a reason to be loyal to you as well. Do as you promise. Keep them informed of your schedule. Treat them fairly, honestly, respectfully. Never leave them in a no-win situation.

### **Relationship with the Client**

This brings us to the endpoint relationship: THE CLIENT. Your ability to have a good relationship with clients is supported or weakened by the foundation relationship we have just discussed.

Always keep in mind that Veterinary Medicine is a service oriented business. People call you because they have a need, and your job is to fulfill it in a timely, professional, competent, friendly manner. Be on time, or at least keep people posted when there are delays. Be sure to keep the office staff informed so that they can do their jobs in this respect. Look the part. A neat, clean vehicle and clothes may be the first and most lasting impression the client has of you. Speak well of your colleagues, or say nothing at all. Always listen to the concern of the client. Do a good job. Utilize all your knowledge and skills as often as you can. Be confident in what you know, and be equally confident about what you do not know. No client expects you to have all the answers all the time. What they do expect is that you are trying your best, honest about the case and willing to go to the ends of the earth to get the answers for them. Be happy to be there. It's tough to warm up to someone who always looks at you like you are unimportant or always seems to be in too big a rush for you. Worse yet, the Veterinarian that seems put out by a client, their barn or their horses is not likely to enjoy a very good rapport with that client, or any of the other clients that person routinely talks to.

Be thorough and deliberate in exams and treatments. The client will be more comfortable when they see that you are approaching the situation in a mindful manner. In school you are taught to list a huge differential, and are quite apt to do so hoping to impress the client with the sheer volume of your knowledge. In reality, I find that clients more often view this as uncertainty, and are apt to think that you are grasping for straws. (I'm not saying not to think the whole thing through, rather do so quietly so that the client gets the impression that you are brilliant in a quiet sort of way).

Always act like you are happy to be there doing what you are doing, even if you are less than sure of your own inner joy. This is especially true of emergencies. New graduates could not have a better vehicle for their own promotion than emergencies. You should be well equipped professionally to deal with cuts, colics and other such disasters. Clients are looking to you in a real time of need, and your prompt, pleasant, reassuring presence will buy you an extraordinary amount of goodwill. Go, smile,

provide a quality service and bill appropriately.

Follow up on your cases with a phone call or a visit when appropriate. Doing so emphasizes that you are serious about the client's animals and they will begin to view you as a true ally. As you become more established in a practice this step may be taken over by a staff member, but you always need to be ready to step in when there are complications or new concerns.

Give the client credit for what they know. Many clients will have established a comfortable pattern of discussion with the existing members of the practice. If the client senses that you, as the "new kid", are dismissing their observations or suggestions out of hand, they are quite apt to lose confidence in you. Listen. Hear them out. Discuss what they tell you. Find something positive to say about their observations or requests. Be confident in yourself, but respectful and thoughtful of the observations of those people who frankly have been involved with the health care of their horses for a lot longer than most new graduates. Humility is much more attractive to clients than is a superior air from someone with little experience.

Use appropriate diagnostics for a given situation. The client recognizes that there is a problem that requires your visit and therefore expects you to do something. They anticipate that physical exams, lab work, or imaging may be needed to get the answer. They are way past the "let's give it a bute and see if whatever it is gets better" stage. They could have done that themselves. They are looking to you for something better.

Be clear on the practice policies regarding pro bono work for friends, staff, trainers, or barn managers. Be quick to point out to clients that may be asking for something that is inappropriate that you are bound to operate under the confines of the practice policy. This removes the onus of such decisions from you and places it firmly where it belongs, on the shoulders of the established members of the practice.

Recognize that not everybody who owns a horse is a saint. Be aware, however, that you only have to work for these people. You do not have to befriend them. Ann Bryon Smollin, a frequent lecturer on relationships, is quick to point out that people are more apt to do what they want to do instead of doing what you want them to do. All the wishing in the world that someone would be less rude, more punctual, or gentler with their horses will not make them so. The best that you can do in these situations is to maintain your own high standards, and do not succumb to their efforts to bring you down to their level.

That doesn't mean that you need to tolerate gross violations of your own professional, ethical or moral codes. If you feel that things are getting out of hand, call the senior members for help. It may be that the client is just trying to see how much they can get away with because you are new, and might back off if the more established members of the practice are brought into the situation. Be aware that any compromise you accept will set the tone of your relationship with that client for a very long time.

There are always a few people that will make life difficult for you. It is always a red flag when a client talks badly of another Veterinarian in your area. Quite often these clients will be quick to speak the same way about you when you are not there. Likewise some clients are fickle, and will not have the same sense of dedication to you that you may have towards them. Recognize that these traits are things that are out of your control. In these cases just continue to do the best job that you can, stay out of the

gossip circle, and don't be depressed when the client's immaturity or dishonesty causes them to abandon you.

Never forget that you have valuable skills and a significant investment in your education. Do quality work and bill appropriately for it. Do not fall victim to the client that complains about the fees. Be aware that some people will always complain about your cost, no matter how inexpensive. Your goal should be to provide quality veterinary service, not cheap veterinary service. If you are the cheapest practice, Sussman's Rule tells us to expect the cheapest clients. You will get them and deserve them. If you are a fairly priced quality practice, you will get clients interested in quality service and who are willing to pay for it. You will deserve them.

Our practice will fire several clients each year. For the most part they are people that are abusive of the lay staff or the Veterinarians. The client is informed by a senior practice member that their needs would probably be better met by another practice, and we will send their records to the practice of their choice. We avoid recommending any other practices, but leave that choice up to the individual themselves. Clients that ask for unethical treatments are refused, and they seldom call back as it is obvious to them that the practice will not perform services that they deem as vital. As Lyle Sussman said, we all get what we deserve in this life. If you encourage, cultivate, or submit to abusive, unethical clients, they will flock to your practice and you will deserve them. If you patiently provide quality services in a professional, ethical, moral fashion you will attract clients that desire such services and you will deserve them.

### **Client Education**

As Veterinarians we are constantly learning new science and techniques. Many of our clients are also very aggressive about gathering new information from journals, meetings, and the Internet. Keep abreast of the popular lay literature for your discipline so that you can anticipate and meet the educational needs of these clients. If they have researched some new condition or an advance in old disease, they expect that you as the medical professional will have done the same.

At the same time be aware that the articles in lay journals are written to attract readers and subscribers by being fun, flashy, and provocative. In doing so the scientific facts may have been spruced-up a bit to stimulate the readers, and you may have people that have received a false impression about many things. This is even more of a concern on the Internet. Just search under EPM sometime and see all the obscure, inaccurate, misleading, dangerous information that is being posted as fact. Owners that are desperate and scientifically naive will often believe written information simply because it exists. Be prepared to help these folks get a grasp on the science of good medicine and the delete the fad information they are being bombarded with.

Well educated clients are much easier for quality practices to deal with. If they understand the why's and how's of diseases and treatments they are more likely to accept quality care for their animals. There was a time when horses were treated with "Doc's Miracle Colic Mix" or "Doc's Mystery Leg Tightener". The clients were never told what was in these things, nor were many colleagues. The efficacy was unproven at best. They are not the type of things one would expect to find as the mainstay of a quality practice today. Sussman tells us that if we educate our clients we will get clients that understand quality service, and we will deserve them. If we fail to educate our clients we will attract

clients that are less open to advances in practice, and we will deserve them.

A great deal of client education takes place during the course of dealing with the horse. Explain what you are doing and why. When new to a practice this is doubly important as it lets the client confirm for themselves that you are a well educated, dedicated, compassionate professional whom they can trust.

Be proactive with educational material. Point out (politely) potential problems such as poor ventilation, the need for a caslick, and undetected chronic uveitis. The owner will be impressed that you are observant, and thorough, and responsive to their horse's needs. It follows that doing things for the good of the horse also provides for the good of the practice.

More formal client education opportunities abound. Offer to talk to the local pony club or 4-H group. Offer practice-sponsored seminars (often underwritten by drug companies that may augment the quality of your presentation). Send out newsletters. Distribute client education brochures. (A wide variety of educational material is available to members of the AAEP). Write a column for the local horse paper or a breed newsletter. Offer to be a guest on local radio or TV programs dedicated to "horse talk". Don't overlook the value of a web site. Look to your state organization and the AAEP for educational materials to use in these formats that will make you a star.

### **Communication**

The glue that holds all of these things is good communications. You need to recognize the need and means to communicate within and between all six of the levels discussed. Keep the lines of communication open at all times.

Return clients calls quickly and politely.

Look for technology that will help. Two-way radios in ambulatory vehicles let practice members hear what is going on as it happens. One of the great strengths of a group practice is the collective knowledge and experience of the group. By "eavesdropping" on each other during the day such practices are able to improve both the quality and the efficiency of the services provided.

Pagers are a given. Alpha numeric pagers will eliminate the chance of clients hearing inappropriate comments. Pages can include a priority code so that you know how quickly a call must be returned to the office. You may wish to avoid giving your pager number directly to a client. If they can page you at any time, they will, and they will also expect you to call back in a timely fashion each time. You will be much more efficient if the calls are routed first through your own receptionist or answering service.

Cellular phone technology is constantly improving and becoming more cost effective. Keep abreast of changes in service several times a year, and do not get locked into long term contracts that may be obsolete before the contract expires. Limit the number of clients that have access to your cell numbers, or be prepared for them to call you directly instead of calling through the office. Let the office provide reception services. Your time will be better spent providing veterinary services.

Answering services need to be scouted out carefully. Provide them with enough education to be able to understand your client's needs. A service that is rude, inefficient, or indifferent will lose you clients.

Laptops, palmtops, modems, satellite links, and countless other computer technologies are finding their way into many practices. Explore them with a keen sense of your needs in mind. Employ those things that improve your efficiency and quality, and disregard those things that do not fit your needs.

### **Conclusion**

Some of this section I learned in vet school (negligible). Some I learned from practice management seminars or books (significant). Most I learned from my own experience and observations (read mistakes). Always be ready to learn from an honest evaluation of your mistakes.

Honest evaluations and good communications are essential in developing any relationship. Do not underestimate the value of any of the levels presented as they all are interconnected and interdependent. Be aware that you will often have to take the initiative in developing good relationships. If you do you will enjoy positive relationships, and you will deserve them. If you neglect this effort, you will experience poor relationships, and you will deserve them.