

A Vet's View

BY DON SHIELDS, DVM

For over a decade, I have practiced veterinary medicine on the racetracks of southern California. Throughout these years, I have heard many complaints about the high price of veterinary care, and of racehorse ownership in general. I tend to agree with the latter, having owned a couple of prospective racehorses myself (neither of them made it to the races). As a professional concerned about the welfare of the horse racing industry, I feel a need to explain why and how some of these veterinary costs arise.

Most of the trainers in southern California have been training for a number of years, and have developed routines that seem to work for them and their various training styles. These programs include the use of many oral medications, which are dispensed by the veterinarian, but are often used at the trainer's discretion. Of course, the veterinarian has input to help refine and update these programs and medication usage.

All athletes, human or animal, undergo daily training stresses that often lead to minor inflammation, muscle soreness, or other aches and pains. These minor injuries can be effectively remedied by reducing training, applying cold, hydrotherapy, and/or the use of dispensed medications (such as Phenylbutazone, Banamine, Robaxin, Naquazone, etc). Trainers also generally have a set routine for the use of injectable medications before a work or race. Some use anti-bleeder medication (Lasix, Robinul, Premarin, etc) on virtually every horse that is working one-half mile or further, while others treat only "known" bleeders. Trainers also vary greatly on the frequency of use of routine diagnostic procedures, such as blood counts and endoscopy, as well as the routine "build-ups" (vitamins, jugs, etc). Therefore, your trainer's various training styles and medication usage dictate a large part of your monthly veterinary bill.

Many owners have looked in trade publications or tack shops and have commented on the price of veterinary medications there compared to our charges. Why the discrepancy?

As in any business, the cost of materials is only one factor in the ultimate cost of the end product. We must factor in all the costs of doing business, such as being available seven days a week, 24 hours a day to be ready and able to tend to your horse's needs. Such costs include office expenses (computers, phones, bookkeepers, accountants, administrative personnel), communication devices (phones, pagers, cellular phones, faxes), veterinary associates, insurance, licenses, vehicles...well, you get the picture.

Unfortunately, to this list we must add bad debt, or those who will not or cannot pay their bills. All of these costs must be factored into every service, and we haven't even factored in our time, schooling, and experience. It's a shame that these costs are reflected in the price of medication, but that is simply

VET BILL CONTINUES ON PAGE 17

ROUTINE ITEMS

TREATMENT	HOW OFTEN PERFORMED	COST
Flu/Rhino Vaccination	Every 2-3 months	\$25.00
De-worming	Every 2-3 months	\$25.00 to Tube Worm by Vet \$10.00 to Paste Worm By Trainer
*Dentistry (Floating teeth)	Every 3-4 months	\$50.00

**A specialist is used to "float" a horse's teeth, or file away the rough edges on the sides of a horse's molars. A horse's chewing action periodically causes sharp edges to develop that can cut their mouths and make eating uncomfortable. If left untreated, a horse's athletic performance may be compromised.*

COMMON MEDICATIONS

TYPE	USED FOR	COST
Antibiotics Penicillin, Tetracycline, Genocin	Treatment of infection Administered by injection, via throat flush, or a nebulizer solution (horse breathes in).	\$25-\$40/day
Sulfa Drugs Tribrissen, trimethalsulfate	Colds, Coughs Administered orally	\$8 / day
Anti-inflammatories Bute, Banamine	Reduction of fever or inflammation in muscles and joints May be administered either orally or by injection	\$15-25/day (Injection) \$2-4/day (Oral) \$2-4 / day
Naproxin, Azium, Naquazone	Administered orally	
Ulcer Therapy Tagamet, carafate	Treat stomach ulcers Administered orally	\$60-150/month
Bleeder Treatment Lasix	Reduce Exercise-Induced Pulmonary Hemorrhaging (EIPH) Most commonly used medication	\$15.00 for a.m. workout \$25.00 * Pre-race
<i>* Vets add an extra charge for filing necessary paperwork with the California Horse Racing Board showing that medication was administered within a restricted time frame.</i>		
Premarin	Used with Lasix for problem bleeders	\$25-50
Robinul	Used with Lasix as a breathing aid for workouts only. Cannot be used pre-race.	\$15.00
Muscle Relaxants Robaxin		\$15 per shot \$5 orally

DIAGNOSTICS

TYPE	USED FOR	COST
X-rays area	Determines injury in bones	\$60-85 per
Ultra-sound	Determines injury in soft tissue (tendons & ligaments).	\$100 per scan
Endoscopy (Examine upper respiratory system)	Diagnose breathing problems, such as malfunctions, infections, or bleeding.	\$50
Soundness Exam	Palpation, gait analysis, hoof-testing, etc.	No charge
CBC (Complete Blood Count)	Additional charge for enzyme levels and blood chemistries.	\$ 35.00

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THE COSTS LISTED ABOVE REPRESENT NORMAL CHARGES.

Decoding Your Vet Bill

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because, unlike a physician, a small animal veterinarian, or a ranch practitioner, we do not normally charge for call fees, office visits, second opinions, radiographic interpretations, or even lameness exams.

My time and experience is given to the trainer free of charge, and hopefully is of great value to you and your horses.

An Owners' View

BY JOHN HARRIS

As trainer Howard Zucker writes, good communication is crucial between owners, trainers, and veterinarians. All three parties should be striving for cost-effective measures that provide long-term benefits to the horse.

With Thoroughbred horses, we do have the luxury of being able to spend considerable amounts of money on veterinary-related treatments if we feel there is at least some chance such action will allow the horse to be more competitive. However, such luxury is both a blessing and a curse, as it encourages expenses that are less-than-certain to be cost-effective. In our cattle operation, we have large-scale trials to review before we consider any medications. With horses, although there are good trials on such as things as vaccinations and wormers, a lot of individual equine treatments are hard to quantify. The numbers just aren't there.

Personally, I think we should develop financial relationships with vets that are not so much based on individual treatments, but more on some sort of retainer to cover the horse's total health care. In addition to saving owners money, veterinarians would be provided a more stable source of income, and a greater ability to practice medicine in the manner that they were trained. For example, a fee could be set that would cover normal vaccinations, dental work, and wormings. Additional treatments would be billed for the drugs at cost. A managed-care arrangement could also be made for X-rays and scans.

In our own farm training operation, we now employ a resident veterinarian. We feel that this will be cost-effective. Hopefully we can use this relationship to help manage the veterinary care at the tracks, working in conjunction with the trainer. However, this will require a degree of mutual understanding, trust, and openness, which sometimes can be hard to achieve with all of the egos involved. So far, though, our experience with this relationship has been good.

Regardless of the decision-makers involved in a horse's health, I think in cases where a horse is in serious trouble, and/or the vet costs look to be significant, it is always good to get a second, or even third, opinion. Such practice is cost-effective and gives one more confidence that their horse is being treated in the best manner possible.

I think owners should be involved in their horse's care. They are paying for it, and are the ones most impacted by the horse's success or failure. Yet we must have confidence in the trainer and the vet, and give them the authority to proceed

when time is of the essence. Once again, the key is good communication, backed up by sound reasoning and appreciation for the use of cost-effective measures.

John Harris is Chairman and CEO of Harris Farms and is President of the California Thoroughbred Breeders Association. He has approximately 25 Thoroughbreds in training, and has been an active participant in the Thoroughbred industry for 30 years.

HORMONES

Winstrol, Equipoise	Anabolic steroids used to stimulate muscle development and appetite.	\$45-50 / month
Testosterone	Also used to stimulate muscle development and appetite	\$25 per treatment
Progesterone	Represses ovulatory cycle in fillies and mares	\$25 per treatment Subcutaneous implants, which are effective for 2-3 months cost \$60-80

VITAMINS AND FLUIDS

ESE (Vitamin E & Selenium)	Used to treat muscle soreness	\$25.00
Misc. Vitamin Shots	Used to treat anemia or vitamin deficiencies.	\$15-25
"Jugs"	Electrolyte solutions used to replace essential ions depleted by workouts, races, or Lasix use.	\$25-35

JOINT THERAPY

Corticoids	Intra-articular injection which provides short-term relief of joint pain and inflammation.	\$35-40 / joint
Hyaluronic Acid	Intra-articular injection provides longer-lasting more therapeutic effect than corticoids – They're better for your horse!	\$100 / joint
Adequan/Legend	Intramuscular/intravenous injections that promote joint health and prevent degenerative joint disease	\$65-75 per week <i>Expensive, but the long-term benefits can be cost-Effective.</i>
Cosequin, Chondroitin Sulfate, Shark Cartilage	Natural products found to be effective in maintaining joint health	\$60-120/month

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

"Dr. Green," or "The Friendly Farm"

Old-timers will tell you that the best therapy for illness, lameness, bleeding, etc is a visit to "Dr. Green." A short rest at a friendly farm is an effective cure-all and will go a long way towards reducing your vet bills.

Kinder Racetracks

Track management, owners, and trainers must continue efforts to improve our racing surfaces. Improved track surfaces will decrease both the frequency of injuries and the cost of ownership.