Being a horse vet is risky business. Official statistics released earlier this year by the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) confirm the profession carries the highest risk of injury of any civilian occupation - higher than construction workers, the prison service and even the fire brigade. This should not be surprising as vets routinely deal with horses that are sick or injured. They may be frightened, in pain or distress and require invasive, sometimes painful, treatments.

A model for change

Dealing daily with animals hard-wired for flight or fight, vets and equine hospital staff alike can expect to get injured. The question is, can the equine veterinary environment be made any safer? Veterinarians and lecturers from the University of Edinburgh’s Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies (R(D)SVS) are investigating if using an evidence-based approach when interacting with horses in a veterinary setting could eliminate unsound or excessively risky practices in favour of others that have better outcomes for both horses and humans.
The vast amount of progress made, however, is not really flowing through to the ‘real world’; to what horse people are actually experiencing on the ground and under-saddle, adding safety and protecting horse welfare. The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies (R(D)SVS) aim has been to start using an evidence-based approach and integrate this into the teaching of vet students to change the way difficult horses are handled in the veterinary environment - making it a safer and happier environment for the horse.

Grooms have lots of horse experience, but often receive no formal training - learning from each other ‘on the job’. Introducing them to learning theory and equitation science aimed to improve their safety and the welfare of the hospitalised patient.

Grooms now receive an hour lecture on learning theory and its application in the vet hospital setting. An online course allows grooms to access videos, lectures and book chapters related to equitation science. The materials have been thought about very carefully and are very accessible. In future, practical sessions will cement the grooms’ learning, and they are being encouraged to practice the techniques with their own horses and patients where appropriate.

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At the 10th International Equitation Science Conference, Denmark, Natalie Waran (Jeanne Marchig Professor of Animal Welfare Education), Gemma Pearson (Senior Clinical Training Scholar in Equine Practice) and Bryony Waggott (Equine Science Teaching Fellow) described to delegates exactly how equitation science is being integrated into the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculums.

The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies’ (R(D)SVS) aim has been to start using an evidence-based approach and integrate this into the teaching of vet students to change the way difficult horses are handled in the veterinary environment - making it a safer and happier environment for the horse. To implement the program, they had to consider all the people involved, and work on developing training programmes to empower the equine hospital grooms.

Empowering the equine hospital grooms

The horses

R(D)SVS has 10 teaching horses that are used for practical classes with the vet student. They vary in background and participate in sessions ranging from husbandry to management, surface anatomy and farriery. The horses have to cope with groups of students and often have to stand still for varied periods of time. Unwanted behaviour, such as difficulty to lead, stop or stand still, are commonly experienced in classes, so the solution is to get the horses involved in training these horses which, in turn, cements their own learning and provides consistent cues to the horses - giving them more predictability in their environment, having thus a positive effect on their welfare and the safety of the students and staff.

The vet students

Vet students attending R(D)SVS come from a wide variety of backgrounds with increasing numbers of foreign students from countries where horses are not commonly kept, so they may have very limited or no horse experience at all.

First year students now receive a behavioural welfare lecture, and also an introductory lecture on learning theory and equitation science. These lectures are followed by practical husbandry classes where students can practice giving correct and consistent cues for leading, stopping and backing-up trained horses. These skills are further developed in the following years.

Second and third year students attend lectures on ethics and welfare. They also have to complete a placement in an equine yard to gain horse husbandry experience. The placements vary greatly ranging from riding schools to racing yards or studs. On their return, students are encouraged to discuss with teaching staff their experiences and the problems they encountered.

After attending one of the equine behaviour lectures and without any prompting, the student handling the mare started scratching her in front of the wither. This was something we’d discussed in the lectures and this mare really enjoyed that.

When asked how often they deal with difficult horses and feel they put themselves in potentially dangerous situations, veterinarians replied: “Most days”.
The second part will look into whether training successfully applying learning theory in veterinary students in the field of equine learning video of Gemma working with a horse that objects veterinary environment for some years with after three 5-minute sessions.

Gemma is currently undertaking a masters degree in research investigating horse-vet interaction. Initially, this will enquire into how frequently horse-vet interactions become problematic and how frequently they deteriorate into dangerous interactions.

The vets

The veterinarians are very positive and say they have seen a difference. While initially the standard comment was “I don’t have time for that”, the one thing that gets their attention is seeing the techniques achieve good results in a short time, particularly with horses that are in the hospital over several days. Whereas before the hospital staff would have tried to restrain a difficult horse, they now consider learning theory-based training as a first-line approach and this is creating a safer working environment.

The vets at the Dick Vet Equine Hospital now consider handling based on learning theory as a first-line approach. This is creating a less stressful and safer working environment.