



Moving Forward from Routine to Advanced Equine Dentistry — Practical implications

By Ruedi Steiger DACVIM, Swissvet Veterinary Products, Knoxville TN

Sometimes it seems like no farm call or appointment is ever “routine”.

Every horse (or pet) owner contributes their own kind of stochastic force so that one might wonder why we even bother labeling anything to do with animals “routine.” However, the word is useful if only to differentiate more commonplace procedures from those that require especially detailed work, additional equipment, or special training.

This article attempts to define the practical differences in routine and advanced equine dentistry in three areas: the difference to the horse owner, to the practicing veterinarian, and the difference in equipment.

The difference, to a horse owner, between routine and advanced dentistry often comes down to the simple definition of price: advanced is code for “more expensive.” It is important to note that this is not necessarily true and that we have a great deal of leverage on this issue; but nevertheless is certainly not the main distinguishing characteristic. Whether the horse is a champion show animal or beloved backyard pet, some owners are more comfortable with risk than others. The same person who wants a full blood workup before anesthesia will likely appreciate the choice between a clunky handfloat and a delicate grinding burr for their horse’s sharp enamel points. There is great security in knowing they have taken fewer chances with their animal’s health by opting for above-average care, that is, more than “routine”. Considering how expensive it



Using well adjusted instruments means more satisfaction on the job

is to care for a horse, a slightly higher charge for a detailed dentistry procedure once a year is usually well perceived.

Implications for the veterinarian

An equine veterinarian might see the distinction between routine and advanced dentistry as, for instance, the difference between quickly rasping points versus carefully correcting a wave complex. This difference comes down to whether or not you need to perform a detailed oral examination with a dental chart, who is qualified to perform the procedure (i.e. technicians) and how long it takes to perform the procedure. Often it is just the difference between visual and non-visual dentistry that sets advanced dentistry apart. Offering advanced dental procedures to your clients can also mean an investment in more advanced equipment and additional training for a more solid base in the field of dentistry and the proper use of dental equipment. Many veterinarians are opposed to high expenses, but quickly dismiss these considerations for dentistry equipment once they realize how such skills set your practice apart, increase referrals, and justify increased fees.



Becoming champion requires hard work without compromise and the best care for the horse.

While higher-level procedures not only distinguish your practice and increase your revenue; they are also a source of great professional satisfaction. The opportunity to continually refine and develop skills, beyond the routine, allows you to see new solutions and offer better, more comprehensive care. Instead of telling clients you will do everything *you* can, tell them you will do everything *possible* to treat their animals. Once on the track of becoming a specialist, referral of special cases will follow and soon you may be confronted with exotic cases that require truly advanced procedures such as tooth extractions, root canals or infundibular caries treatment. Then you will have become a true dental specialist! Where to stop is everybody's own choice but this is certainly a great chance to break loose from tedious vaccinations and dewormings that seem to burn out so many veterinarians after years of routine practice.

Implications for the equipment

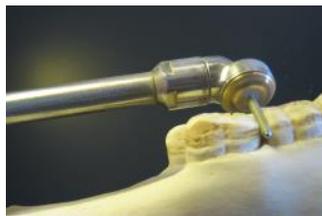
Ultimately, the definition of routine vs. advanced dentistry comes down to the disparity in resources: your time, effort, and equipment. With the proper equipment, advanced procedures need not take additional time or extra effort. Routine instruments get the commonplace jobs done but typically do not have the versatility to transition into uncommon jobs without compromise. Attempting to put routine materials to advanced use is like going off-road in a sedan: it might get the job done, but you are just as likely to get stuck in the mud. The tools we use dictate what we can do and how we do it. Routine instruments give us fewer choices and limit the detail we can achieve. Whereas higher-level instruments, like your clinic's truck, allow you to complete routine jobs but go off-road when you need to. We can then define advanced dental equipment as tools that give us the options necessary to effectively treat both routine and non-routine cases.

Examples of advanced dentistry procedures

So, if not the rare cheek tooth extractions, what sort of routine situations can an equine vet encounter that may require finer control and detail? I would like to present a few examples here to demonstrate that these are not heroic treatments but rather, very detailed and carefully executed procedures.

Geriatric horses

Older animals are prime examples for situations where a careful approach is needed. These horses often have worn or missing teeth and excessive floating is not required. Instead, dental care focuses on detailed work to make the horse more comfortable. If a tooth abutting such an inaccessible space develops a sharp edge, a burr-type hand piece will easily correct what a straight routine float never could.



Advanced equipment allow treatment of conditions often neglected

Sharp enamel points

Similarly, an apple core burr can very precisely remove sharp enamel points following the irregular buccal (or lingual) surface of cheek teeth - without the removal of excessive tooth material as we often see it with straight floats. These are most certainly routine cases, but by smoothing only the sharp areas, it is possible to preserve as much as possible of the occlusal surface. Thus, ensuring physiological alignment, efficient chewing, more even wear, and ultimately, improving tooth longevity.

Diastema burring

The same grinding hand piece can be equipped with a cylindrical burr that allows work on interdental space such as it might be needed in cases of periodontal disease. This is most certainly an example where hand instruments are not capable of doing the job.

Finally, consider how the curvature of some advanced instruments would improve the detail of wave correction. Again, the precision afforded by non-routine equipment gives you more control over affected areas and more freedom in how you approach the procedure. Higher-level equipment allows you the maneuverability for innumerable services. You will no longer have to leave a farm knowing that the job is not done properly or that you should have referred the case away to other practices. Such equipment is absolutely necessary to any equine practice that wishes to offer comprehensive care.

Cost effectiveness

This leads us, once more, to the issue of expenditure. Consider a practice that floats only one horse a day. By increasing the price of a dental work by 10%, they have paid off their equipment upgrade within a year not even counting revenue from the new procedures they offer. This is a faster return on investment than with any other equipment in an average practice.

When the cost of advanced equipment is reasoned in this light, it simply cannot be considered an obstacle to all of the advantages high-level work offers: clients feel more confident in their veterinary care; veterinarians enjoy benefits to their practice, continue to develop their skill set, and lastly, have access to equipment that provides greater control over treatment and care.