

## **OVER THE HILL? – HOLISTIC GERIATRIC CARE**

### **Penny M. Lloyd, D.V.M.**

In this seminar we will look at the special needs of older horses to maintain optimal health. Nutrition, water, exercise, physical therapy, dental, shelter, blankets, hoof care, vet care, saddle fit, and mental considerations will be discussed.

As horses age, their ability to digest feed is reduced. Protein and vitamin requirements change. Complete senior feeds are available. Water can be added to feed to help horses with poor teeth. Dental care is extremely important to maintain weight, and prevent choke and colic. Supplying warm water will increase consumption, and reduce the chance of colic. Individualized exercise and therapy programs including acupuncture and chiropractic can be very beneficial in maintaining athletic function in older horses. Many horses do well on joint flex products and natural anti-inflammatory products. Thin horses will have trouble keeping warm in the winter. Overweight horses are at increased risk for laminitis and arthritis. A horse that has been shod its entire life, takes time to adapt to going barefoot. Gravity plays a role over the years, and swaybacks are common. This causes most saddles to bridge. A center shim can be helpful in improving saddle fit. Most older horses like to be put out to pasture with a companion. Others prefer to maintain a part-time job.

Generally, as older horses lose their athletic abilities, their perceived value declines. However the wisdom these horses accumulate throughout their life is greatly underestimated. The rewards of really getting to know a horse in their golden years, is worth the extra effort that it takes to look after them properly.

### **THE END RESULT – Penny M. Lloyd, D.V.M.**

**I was just finishing a veterinary visit to check some horses that had been rescued from neglect. I was busily putting my supplies back into my vet box, when I felt the whisper of a nudge on my back. As I stepped down from my truck and turned, I was surprised to nearly run into one of the horses I had just examined, standing directly behind me. All the rest of the horses were out grazing, but this horse made a special effort to come over and see me off. This gesture touched my heart, as I realized that he had come to say “Thank you” in his own special way. I gazed into the velvet depths of his liquid brown eyes and felt a delicious warmth seep into my heart. Gently, I touched the side of his weathered face, returning his gracious sentiments. Our connection lasted a few brief seconds, before my attention was distracted by the approach of the director of the equine rescue operation. Reluctantly, I pulled my attention away from the wonderful energy emanating from this generous creature, to take care of business. Kit Carson slowly ambled off to join the rest of the herd.**

*Later, I thought about how my heart had expanded as I had interacted with this horse. There was something very special about him. Others at the rescue had also noticed the huge heart that this horse had. When I had first met him earlier that day, I took a moment to greet him and try to see who he really was, beyond the old rack of bones standing before me. He had stood there, a warm, receptive, trusting presence within a body that was weak and malnourished from neglect.*

*Then, I began my veterinary examination. Even as I applied a full mouth speculum, and checked his teeth, he did his best to cooperate. We trotted him to check the extent of his lameness issues, and he did his best on game, yet unsteady legs. Despite his physical condition, there was something very strong about this horse, indeed.*

*Tippie Canoe was another horse that I looked at that day, rescued from the same situation. Both horses were 25 years old and in the same poor physical condition. As I approached him, he looked at me with a wary fear and mistrust. Although he had a similar background to Kit Carson, his view was different. Even approached with patience and kindness, he did not have the trust to receive our good intentions. Throughout the examination, he was always on the edge of fight or flight mode. Even in his frail physical condition, he was ready to take on the world. He was a feisty one. He would need to be tranquilized to examine his teeth, but that would have to wait until he had gained some weight back. Meanwhile, the people at the rescue would try to form a bond with him and draw him from his position of mistrust. We hoped that with consistent gentle handling and encouragement, we might be able to help him let down his defenses. He too was a very strong horse living inside a shell, weak from neglect.*

*The contrast between the two horses was remarkable. What made two horses, the same age, with similar backgrounds, so different? Both horses had survived a terrible ordeal, and had lived a long life full of challenges. Through it all, one horse had survived with a warm open loving heart, while the other horse had survived with a guarded, deep mistrust and fear. I thought about how this was similar to geriatric people. Some old folks became hardened and bitter from life experience. Others steadily increased their ability to see wonders, and give and receive love as they aged. Two lives lived, with distinctly different end results. Both horses had physical bodies that showed the ravages of time and neglect. But their outward appearance belied the strong spirit beneath. Both were tough and strong, showing magnificent resilience and strength of character. Both held enormous wisdom of the ages. Both were grossly underestimated in value by our society.*

*I thought about the untapped wisdom of our geriatrics. And I thought about which “old nag” I would become.*