

Program Brings Honours and Better Health to Horses

Nearly two years ago, one of Dr. David Paton's clients was faced with a tough decision: the farmer's favourite Clydesdale horse was so ill that the only humane choice was to euthanize the prized animal.

"It was quite an emotional situation for him because he was very close to this horse. He was a typical farmer who didn't want to show his feelings, but I knew it was very hard for him," recalls Paton, a veterinarian in Aldergrove, B.C. He and Dr. Eric Martin operate Paton & Martin Veterinary Services Ltd. — an equine clinic that serves horse owners in B.C.'s Lower Fraser Valley.

Paton had often sent sympathy cards and flowers to grieving clients in the past — but in this case, those gestures just didn't seem right.

That's when Paton thought of the Equine Health Research Fund. Dedicated to supporting equine health research and training programs at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVN), the Fund has helped to improve the quality of horse health care for horses of all breeds and ages throughout Western Canada. Paton, who is a member of the Fund's advisory board, was convinced that it was an ideal fit and made a donation to EHRF on the farmer's behalf.

"My client phoned me up when he received my note, and he was very grateful. For him, that was a fitting tribute for his horse," says Paton, who has repeated the gesture for other clients.

"I've had several people actually write thank you letters rather than calling or mentioning it the next time we see them. In particular, I remember the response of one client — a young woman — who had owned her horse for a long period of time before it died of cancer. She was very appreciative of our donation, and it was a great comfort for her to know that a contribution in her horse's memory was going to benefit the health of other horses."

Based on those experiences, Paton began to wonder: if this was a fitting way to honour horses at his practice, what if other veterinary clinics across Western Canada made the same gesture?

In February 2005, Paton introduced the idea of developing an equine memorial program at the EHRF annual meeting. His fellow board members responded with enthusiasm, and almost a year later, Paton described aspects of the initiative at the Western Canadian Association of Equine Practitioners' annual meeting in Saskatoon, Sask.

Every time a veterinarian makes a memorial donation of \$10 or more to the Fund in honour of a deceased patient or client, administrative staff at WCVN's Research and Development Office sends the client or the client's family a letter acknowledging the veterinarian's contribution to EHRF. The College also includes some background information about the Fund and about its research and training activities.

"It gives you a warmer, more rewarding feeling to contribute money to something that has long-term benefits for equine research. Flowers are beautiful, but they're not going to last as long as a donation to the horse health fund," points out Paton.



He adds that practitioners and horse owners alike shouldn't feel that only large investments of thousands of dollars make any difference in horse health research. "That's just not true: a little bit of money goes a long way in certain areas of research, and the College is well-suited to conducting some effective research without having to secure huge amounts of money per project. All of those donations — \$25 here, \$25 there — they all add up to do so much."

Paton initially donated to the Fund only on behalf of long-time clients, but his practice now sends in memorial donations for any client who loses a horse. The practitioner says the program is also ideal for honouring the lives of people and can serve as a fitting tribute to individuals who have enjoyed a lifelong involvement with horses.

"It shows that you care and that you're sorry for the family's loss. At the same time, it will hopefully help to give the Fund greater exposure and more potential for raising more money for research. In the long run, that will benefit everyone who is involved in horses," says Paton. **H**

For more information on how to donate to the Equine Health Fund, visit www.ehrf.usask.ca, call 306-966-7453 or send an email message to wcvn.research@usask.ca.