

Farrier Services at North American Veterinary Teaching Hospitals

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of this study was to accurately characterize farrier services at North American VTHs in 2023 as a basis for discussion and future initiatives here and abroad which might positively impact patient care and the two professions' advancement. Accordingly, the most recent data will be compared with that derived from the survey conducted in 2004 (and published in 2010) using descriptive statistics including mean, median and range for continuous numeric data, and frequencies and percentages for categorical data.

Study design: A cross-sectional survey.

Methods: Faculty and/or attending farriers at each of the 32 North American VTHs were asked to complete an Institutional Review Board-approved, multiple choice and free response questionnaire characterizing VTH farrier demographics, training, certification, remuneration, clinical, teaching and research responsibilities; and FS prevalence, facilities and financial viability.

Results: With 97% of VTHs offering in-house farrier services, the study revealed demographic insights into the 42 farriers, emphasizing variations in age, work hours, and

payment structures. Noteworthy findings include the majority of farriers completing both farrier school and apprenticeships. The study underscored the perceived importance of in-house farrier services for clinical care and training, with financial implications showing a mix of profitability and cost coverage. Collaborative efforts between farriers and veterinarians were evident in the extension of services to both sick and healthy patients. Facility arrangements varied, and training initiatives by the farrier service, while widespread, indicated a preference for clinical settings over formal lecture-style sessions.

Conclusion: VTH farriers are a valuable resource who can contribute effectively with veterinary clinicians toward VTH patient care, education, and research.

1 | Introduction

Veterinarians and farriers both have important roles in promoting equine welfare through the provision of preventative health care, the education of owners about the health needs of their horses, and the treatment of specific limb unsoundness. The farriers' functional knowledge of the lower limb and ability to physically manipulate the hoof through selective trimming and/or therapeutic shoeing complements the veterinarians' medical and surgical expertise. Horses can be best served when the two professions work together but this is frequently impractical. Veterinary Teaching Hospitals (VTH) offer one location, however, where the opportunity for collaboration exists. In addition to enhancing patient care, a VTH farrier service can also positively contribute to professional education programs, research initiatives, and the fiscal viability of the clinic. This being said, our knowledge of existing VTH farrier services in North America remains limited. With the exception of the two 2010 publications with which this study is

based on and aims to expand, there exist no sources of verifiable information on VTH farrier services.

2 | Materials and Methods

Faculty and/or attending farriers at each of the 32 North American VTHs were asked to complete an Institutional Review Board-approved, multiple choice and free response questionnaire characterizing VTH farrier demographics, training, certification, remuneration, clinical, teaching and research responsibilities; and FS prevalence, facilities and financial viability.

3 | Results

The survey had an overall 94% response rate, with data collected from 25 United States and 5 Canadian VTHs. Twenty-nine of 30 (97%) VTHs offered in-house farrier services. The one VTH that didn't, referred clients to either a VTH-unaffiliated farrier off-site or back to their regular farrier. Seventeen of 29 (59%) VTH farrier services were provided by a single individual, 4 (14%) VTHs had a two-farrier service, and 5 (17%) had a three-farrier service. The other 3 VTHs that provided in-house farrier services (10%) didn't have a VTH-affiliated farrier who regularly provided clinical services. Of the 42 total farriers across the 29 VTHs with farrier services, Five (12%) were less than 30 years old (y.o.), 25 (60%) were 30-50 y.o. and 12 (29%) were over 50 y.o. Thirteen of the 28 (46%) respondent VTHs had their farriers work a set number of hours per week. Of the other fifteen, 14 (50%) had their farriers work 'as-needed' and 1 failed to answer the question.

At 8 of the 26 (31%) respondent VTHs the farriers were paid directly by the client, at 7 (26%) VTHs the farriers were on salary, while at 4 (15%) VTHs the farriers received an hourly wage paid by the VTH. The remaining 7 (27%) farrier services were paid by the VTH, who billed the client. Twenty-three of 36 (64%) VTH farriers with known training history had completed farrier school and an apprenticeship, 4 (11%) completed farrier school only, and 5 (14%) completed only an apprenticeship. Of those attending farrier school, 11 (44%) undertook a course lasting less than 3 months and only 6 (24%) completed a course lasting more than 1 year. Of the apprenticeships, 12 (41%) lasted longer than two years. Twenty-three of 37 (62%) VTH farriers with known certification were certified by a professional farriery organization. Seven (18%) VTH farriers had practiced for less than 10 years and 12 (31%) had practiced for greater than 25 years. None of the 23 responding VTHs required their farriers to attend continuing education.

Twenty-five of the 29 (86%) VTHs offering in-house farrier services considered them to be 'very important' or 'critical' to the success of clinical services; 13 (49%) considered them to be 'very important' or 'critical' to the success of student training; and 9 (31%) considered them to be 'very important' or 'critical' to the success of house officer training. At 7 of 23 (30%) respondent VTHs, the farrier service was profitable while at 14 (61%) it only covered its costs. Of the 29 VTHs offering farrier services, all (100%) served clinical patients, but only 18 (62%) VTHs offered services to horses with no apparent ailment. Of the latter group, more than 20% of horses at 3 (17%) VTHs were subsequently referred by the VTH farrier to a VTH veterinarian, and at 10 (56%) VTHs 6-20% of cases were referred for veterinary assessment of unsoundness detected during

routine farriery. Nineteen of 29 (66%) VTHs provided their farriers with dedicated work space while the others shared facilities with other services.

Three (13%) of the 23 respondent VTH farrier services offered no training in a clinical setting. Of the 20 that did, 17 (85%) instructed students, 15 (75%) instructed house officers, 10 (50%) instructed veterinary faculty and/or non-VTH veterinarians, and 10 (50%) instructed non-VTH farriers and/or lay people. Over the past year, an average of 640 hours was dedicated to training these groups in a clinical case management setting. The training duration varied across the 20 VTHs, ranging from 5 to 7,000 hours, and was facilitated by farriers. With regard to formal lecture- or symposium-style training, eleven (48%) of the 23 respondent VTH farrier services provided no service of this type. Of the 12 that did, 11 (92%) instructed students in this manner, 1 (8%) instructed house officers, 1 (8%) instructed veterinary faculty and/or non-VTH veterinarians, and 2 (17%) instructed non-VTH farriers and/or lay people. Over the past year, an average of 14.5 hours was dedicated to training these groups in a didactic lecture setting. The training duration varied across the 12 VTHs, ranging from 1 to 35 hours, and was facilitated by farriers.

Ten of 33 (30%) VTH farriers participated in research activities at 9 VTHs. Of these, 6 (60%) farriers undertook such activities five or less days per year while 2 (20%) contributed more than 15 days per year to research.

4 | Discussion

The majority of North American VTHs offer in-house farrier services for client-owned animals and a majority identify the farrier service as a profit center or capable of covering

its operational costs. The data implies an institutional preference for seasoned individuals or a trend for more seasoned farriers to prefer the part-time work VTH services generally represent. Although the age of the farriers and extent of their professional experience implies an acceptable degree of expertise, only 64% had completed farrier school training and an apprenticeship. Additionally, no VTH farriers were required to attend any form of continuing education, leaving open the question of whether or not VTH farriers provide an optimal level of service. Two-thirds of the surveyed VTHs offer farrier services for apparently healthy horses. This is an important additional revenue source because a substantial proportion of these animals end up being referred by the VTH farrier for additional VTH veterinary evaluation. At the majority of VTHs the farriers represented an educational resource, participating in the instruction of various professional and lay groups. Substantially fewer VTH farriers also participated in research related activities.

Acknowledgements

Author Contributions:

Eierle S, BS: Contributed to conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, drafting of the manuscript, revision and final approval of the manuscript. Fielding A, DVM: Contributed to study design. Kirker-Head C, Vet MB, MRCVS, DACVS, DECVS: Contributed to conception and design of the study, the acquisition of data, and reviewing and final approval of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this report.

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