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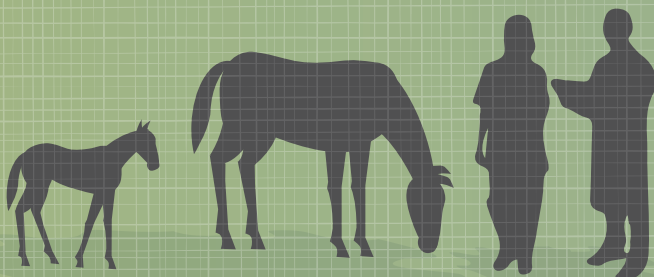
Championing the Equine Vet



60th



Handbook of Presentations



11.30

How can we get the owner to instigate the recommended changes?

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Management of laminitis or excess weight in a controlled setting is relatively straightforward, yet working with horse-owners in their various environments to implement required management techniques can be challenging. While the difficulties in achieving weight loss are often assumed to arise from lack of owner engagement, it is important to recognise the full spectrum of issues facing owners in the process. Previous research has highlighted that UK horses live in an obesogenic environment, as a result of: the changing role of horses as companion animals; the physical environment (e.g. rye grasses; lack of adaptations available on livery yards; unsafe hacking; warmer winters); and the social environment (e.g. overweight seen as a social norm; owners feeling pressured not to overtly diet their horses). Tackling this spectrum of issues requires a multifaceted approach, with change across individual, community and societal levels. In this talk, we will explore the research and interventions made in the complementary fields of child, dog, and equine obesity behaviour change, across the three aspects mentioned above.

Relationships between a carer and obese child/dog/horse

In child and companion animal obesity, it is posited that overweight may be a result of relationships in which the parent/owner finds it difficult to set boundaries around behaviour and food [1-3]. An interventional research study aimed at reducing prevalence of child obesity in the North of England has been particularly successful, usually accredited to its assistance with parenting skills such as boundary setting [4]. While this link has been less well explored in the equine setting, if we assumed a similar relationship between people and horses, then teaching boundary setting and ways of displaying affection without feeding could be useful to assist owners in managing horses during feeding, treat giving, and exercise.

The physical environment

In human health, the physical environment has been manipulated to reduce levels of obesity; for example, sugar taxes, traffic light systems on food, and the reduced size of treats such as chocolate bars [5,6]. However, evidence for the efficacy of these approaches is lacking. The companion animal sphere has been slower to implement societal-level alterations to the physical environment, yet with equine obesity, the environment is perhaps one of the most obesogenic factors [7]. Limiting environmental obesogenic effects could be particularly impactful, for example by promoting nongrass turnout/track systems, clarifying energy levels on feed bags for hard feed and bagged haylage, and working with yard owners to facilitate common weight management strategies such as hay soaking.

The social environment

In human obesity, it is well recognised that social support is key in preventing and managing overweight; multiple childhood obesity studies target child and adult lifestyles concurrently, and

recognise the need to include the whole family in interventions. In adult health, social support for weight reduction is achieved through groups such as 'Slimming World' and social events which promote a healthy lifestyle such as 'Couch25k'. Canine obesity practitioners also recognise the need to work with the whole family [8], yet wider support (for example, the buy-in from livery yard managers, sharers, and yard staff) has been somewhat neglected in equine obesity management. The equine world has also made less use of social support, though initiatives exist such as Your Horse's #hack1000miles campaign, and the #weightwin initiative which rewards healthy body condition in showing classes.

Conclusion

Lessons learned from child and dog obesity studies could be extrapolated to the equine field. Importantly, childhood obesity is tackled at multiple levels, from individual (e.g. communications training for parents) through to family, community, and societal interventions. Canine obesity research acknowledges the need for individually tailored weight management and the role of the entire family unit. Notably, in each sphere there is no 'magic recipe' or silver bullet which has been found to prevent or reduce obesity; instead, multiple strategies show some level of usefulness.

The equine sector could make use of the findings from other fields to improve equine obesity management on both an individual level, and to alter the social and physical environments. For example, equine practitioners could better utilise the involvement of multiple caregivers (e.g. the horse-owner's partner, yard manager, instructor, sharers or staff) to ensure a holistic approach to managing the horse. Similarly, the promotion of nonobesogenic environments, such as low-grass but high-welfare-enriched turnout areas, could facilitate the prevention and management of overweight horses.

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