

Equine PPID Connectivities and Covid-19: 2020 Journal Reflections

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March 8th. I book a routine vet visit for my geriatric rescue pony's annual vaccinations and hormone-monitoring test.

March 22nd. In line with pandemic protocols the vet cancels all non-emergency equine visits.

March 24th. It's suddenly warm. The pony looks unwell, overheating in his super-shaggy winter coat. The grass is growing fast, flushed with nutrients too rich for his system. Despite my careful restriction of his grass intake, each spring is a tricky time. If human, he would amply qualify for the virus 'at risk' category. He's 34, which equates to 100-plus in human years and he has two underlying health issues - laminitis, established during the severe neglect he suffered in early life, and Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID), a progressive age-related hormonal imbalance. Usually both are manageable following twice yearly vet assessments, but this year is different. Without testing, I don't know how much the PPID has progressed. I can neither stable him 24/7, nor stop the grass growing. He's not an emergency. Not yet.

Laminitis and PPID, aka Cushings, are inter-linked. To understand a laminitis flare-up, imagine a tight-fitting thimble on a finger which a hornet then stings. As the venom-filled finger swells, the immovable thimble grips it ever tighter generating agonising heat and pressure. This is what rich grass does to laminitic hooves: constricted by the rigid hoof-wall, the foot's internal tissues can't expand. The pressure can be so intense that the pedal bone (colloquially, coffin bone) becomes permanently displaced, or rotated.

PPID's effects include excessive production of the stress hormone, cortisol. As well as inducing laminitis, the condition also causes increased hair growth and inability to moult. So a vicious cycle ensues - overheating exacerbates the stress caused by the hormone imbalance and the laminitis-induced foot pain causes the animal to stress and further overheat.

I increase the pony's anti-inflammatory medication dosage and check his feet for heat three times daily. As yet, all four hooves are cool.

March 25th. The pony is sweaty and dejected. In a phone-consult the vet advises calming the system with increased dosage of anti-inflammatories, allowing minimal grazing time, stabling him for longer, and - above all - clipping off his coat. A dilemma: I rely on a friend for clipping, but now social distancing is mandatory. When I remind the vet that the pony already has one rotated pedal bone, she unhesitatingly urges "Clip! It's a welfare issue."

I hesitate, consider. What to do? I'm indebted to the pony for the companionship and pleasure he gives. He deserves all the good care and quality of life I can manage as redress for the neglect that others once subjected him to.

I call Lucy. She's eager to help, but we discuss pandemic pros and cons at length. Will we pose unreasonable risk to each other, to our families, by meeting? Lucy's husband is a farming sector key-worker. We count backwards: neither of us have mingled socially for a fortnight. What if we don't clip? If the pony crashes I might need the vet and the knacker-man. What if neither could attend? It's too awful to contemplate. Reviewing the pony's X-rays, I know that bone mustn't move another millimetre. We'll clip.

March 26th. The pony is unbearably hot. Lucy arrives. Technically we break the two-only rule: I steady the pony, Lucy slices hair, and my partner sweeps up the carpet of dangerously skiddy clippings. We maintain the requisite two metres distance while Lucy works at the tail-end, but it's harder as she progresses towards me. We take frequent pauses to cool the clipper blades and give the pony a break. The process takes almost two hours, long enough to attract the attention of neighbours and passers-by. Their looks say it all. I anxiously run through my justifications for what must look like a frivolous, badly-timed equine hairdressing session.

In pandemic times, this routine task has not only become a medical equine-welfare issue, but is also fraught with problematic moral and ethical issues. We believe we are asymptomatic, but the awkward position we are in is decidedly virus-influenced: we're apparently breaking social distancing rules, but in fact complying with legitimate veterinary instruction. I can't be only person uncomfortable with such conundrums at present.

March 28th. So far, so good: the vet's advice is working.

I think about the interconnections between human- and horse-welfare during lockdown, connections that prompt questions: What is right? For whom? Why? Which imperative trumps which? Whose word goes in unprecedented times of disease precaution? I'm troubled by the tensions between permission and precaution, infection and infraction.

April 3rd. Like us, the pony is restless. He neither likes nor understands his confinement.

My responses to this single minuscule side-effect of the planetary pandemic illustrate how, in quarantine conditions, we become more aware, i.e. both self-aware and aware of one another's actions. I notice how the upsurge of altruistic community spirit is being paralleled by less-acknowledged negative feelings. It seems we are all more self-conscious, more consciously self-monitoring as well as more alert to others' overt or covert social surveillance of us. The crisis is a double-edged one: it involves not only the control and containment of micro-organisms and sickness, but also the spread of criticism, suspicion, judgement and blame. We glance over our shoulders to see if we are watched while staying on the lookout for watchers and rule-breakers. Super-sensitised to the point of paranoia, we are both surveyors and surveyed. Disease and social unease go hand in glove.

April 9th. Fourteen days since clipping: nobody in my household or Lucy's shows symptoms.

April 10th. One of the pandemic's powers is its explicit revelation of just how closely everything and everybody are connected in a myriad of tenuous and direct, tangible and intangible ways. Until now I could never have anticipated exactly how protocols, proscriptions, a pituitary gland, pony hair, spring grass, warm weather, watchfulness, coffin-bones, cortisol, Covid and Cushings would collide.

The British daily death toll of 980 overtakes Spain's and Italy's. I count my blessings.

As for the pony? He's improved enough to resume his daily constitutional walks today.