

On a mission: caring for working equids abroad

AFTER an unpromising start, Gigi Kay has carved a career for herself working for organisations providing veterinary care for the working equids in some of the poorest communities overseas. Here she describes some of her experiences, as well as the challenges facing the communities, their animals and, in turn, the organisations striving to help them.

GIGI KAY



Donkey victim of the 2004 earthquake in Morocco, attended by the SPANA veterinary rescue team



Gigi Kay graduated from Edinburgh in 1998. After spending a year locuming in the UK, she joined SPANA and worked in Morocco from 1999 until 2005. She then moved to Qatar where she has been working as the veterinary services coordinator for the Doha Asian Games. She is currently involved with a relatively new equine charity, Animal Care Egypt, which is based in Luxor. Her clinical interests include medical and surgical problems facing working equids and she is enrolled for the RCVS certificate in equine internal medicine.

MY first efforts at helping a working equid in the developing world ended in splendid failure. I was nine at the time and sitting in the back of my mother's car as we sped through some forgotten desert in the dull heat of the Arabian summer, when a donkey hobbled into view with his front leg firmly embedded in a tin can. After much insistence, the car stopped. I leapt out and set off on my number 1 mercy mission, with my arm proffered out in friendship and a smile on my face that I was sure translated as 'I'm here to help.'

The donkey in question removed himself rapidly from the approaching hazard. He clearly had enough on his plate without having to deal with the probable incompetence of this would-be helper. I ran on in pursuit. My mother, alarmed by now, was yelling and waving from the car for my return and I was yelling and waving after the hobbling donkey for his. Eventually, chagrined and frustrated, I was dragged back to the car and left to absorb a very important lesson: helping the working equid in the Middle East can be a lot harder than it might at first appear.

AN OPPORTUNITY PRESENTS

Years later, as an almost new veterinary surgeon looking for a job, I came across an advertisement from SPANA, the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad,

seeking to recruit a vet to head up its veterinary team in Morocco. SPANA is one of a small handful of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that offer free veterinary care to working equids in Africa and the Middle East. I joined the charity as Technical Director in Morocco in the autumn of 1999. I had a whole lifetime of experience of living in the Middle East, and I was fluent in most of the languages that you need to get by in Morocco. However, I had only 18 months of experience of veterinary medicine under my belt and I knew from my first lesson with working equids that this was going to be an extraordinary challenge.

Logistical hurdles

Challenge number 1 was logistical; remembering which of the myriad of inconsequential dusty little desert tracks was the particular one that led to a SPANA hospital. In Morocco, SPANA runs 10 equine hospitals that are scattered across the country from the southern edge of the Atlas mountains to the northern Mediterranean coast, and so this particular challenge was one I faced in 10 discrete locations many times over. Once found, the logistical problems continued – how to remember the names and faces of the 40 Moroccan vets and 40 Moroccan technicians who formed the SPANA team. This was a crucial issue. Politeness is everything in the Arab world and fumbling with names can be a costly faux pas.

MY REMIT

When I left for Morocco my remit from head office had been remarkably broad. The job description went roughly speaking like this: 'Get to know the problems, devise the solutions and make sure you maintain excellent relations with everybody.' It was the best possible advice.

Now, seven years later, I can define my goals more closely but perhaps not as succinctly. I was responsible for ensuring that we achieved the best standard of care for the 100,000 working equids that passed through our doors each year within the boundaries of understandable financial limitations. I was responsible for exploring and evaluating all avenues for improving equine welfare in Morocco and I was responsible for advising the team that hoped to educate young Moroccans on animal welfare. I was also responsible for maintaining excellent relations with everybody.

Improving clinical standards

From these goals, several objectives crystallised as paramount and one of these was improvement of the clinical standards of our staff and of our clinics. The value of a working equid to its owner is incalculable – the very wellbeing of the owner and his family is intimately linked to the wellbeing of his donkey, horse or mule and therefore the hospitalisation and care of such an animal places an enormous burden of responsibility and moral commitment on the carer. It goes

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without saying that, when dealing with the livelihoods of an underprivileged community, the old maxim of ‘first do no harm’ is imperative, and the more optimistic maxim of ‘second do some good’ should be the minimum standard. If the SPANA clinics were to be effective in both these commitments, then training the staff and equipping them appropriately had to become my first priority.

Exchanging information

With the involvement and cooperation of the veterinary team, an intensive and diverse approach to continuing education was implemented in Morocco for both vets and paravets. The principal basis of this was the exchange of information between Europe and Morocco, which I hoped would break down some of the professional isolation evident in equine veterinary medicine in Morocco. To this end we invited specialists and volunteers to come out and provide CPD and training on an ongoing basis. I organised for SPANA’s Moroccan vets to visit practices in Europe, to go to seminars and conferences abroad, and to undertake SPANA-funded internship programmes in France. Links were forged with universities in the USA, France and the UK. The University of Liverpool’s equine department, for example, has since dedicated much time and effort to helping the vets in Morocco improve the level of care they can offer.

Providing literature

I put huge effort into the provision of published information to our veterinary staff. This was tricky; there are relatively few veterinary textbooks in French and not many are equine based. After much prevarication, we decided that attempting a translation of Rose and Hodgson’s ‘Manual of Equine Practice’ was the only way we could make a general equine text available to SPANA’s francophone vets, not only in Morocco but in Mali, Mauritania and Tunisia as well. With a budget of £2000, and a lot of help from friends, the SPANA



A working mule in Marrakech – a product of poverty and lack of knowledge

vets and I set about the mammoth task of translating and publishing 900 pages of essential equine wisdom. A glittering high point of my six years in Morocco was the day that Professors Rose and Hodgson together signed a copy of the new ‘Manuel de Pratique Equine’, published by SPANA Morocco, while on a visit to the SPANA hospital in Marrakech as part of the 2006 World Equine Veterinary Association (WEVA) congress.

UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

The SPANA veterinary staff and I faced a huge learning curve. Pathology among working equids in the developing world is extreme and debilitating. Much of it is agonisingly chronic, with animals suffering for years from conditions that, in Europe, would have necessitated euthanasia long since. In addition, much of what we saw was either unreported in the veterinary literature or reported only for historical interest. As a relatively new vet, this was confusing. On bad days I could imagine that I hadn’t been to a single equine lecture – nothing had that warm and reassuring familiarity of something you recognise from a lecture theatre or something you might have read about somewhere.

A typical day would consist of driving three hours to a hospital in the mountains, consulting on a tetanus case, a possible rabies case, a colicky horse that was probably yet another case of plastic bag ingestion, an animal so crippled in every joint that I wondered what use a lameness exam would be, followed, finally, by surgery to free up an incarcerating bowel from one of the mysterious abdominal wall ruptures that seem so ubiquitous. The minutes avail-



Mule showing discomfort caused by a traditional bit. (inset) A typical bit used in Morocco



A dramatic and memorable case: an injection abscess site in the neck of a horse in Morocco. After intensive medical therapy for over six weeks, the tissue deficit had all but healed, leaving just a 1 cm hole

able between patients were spent with the owners, explaining correct feeding goals in the case of the colicky horse, gently chastising where wire had been used to hobble a donkey or engine oil poured into its wounds, or simply not knowing what to do in the case of the old man crying in front of his dying mule.

EDUCATING OWNERS . . .

Educating owners about how best to care for their animals is a frustrating but critical aspect of the job. Most are illiterate and uneducated; they rely for husbandry knowledge on tradition handed down over generations. These traditions can be cata-



Waiting for treatment at SPANA's mobile clinic in Rabat

strophic for the health of their animals. SPANA, alongside other NGOs involved in this field, realised that only by changing standards of care could we reliably improve welfare. An example of this is the attempts made to dissuade owners from 'firing' in the face of lameness. Working in Luxor recently with a new veterinary NGO, Animal Care Egypt (ACE), our team was approached by an owner whose horse had horrific burn scars in parallel lines down

the dorsal aspect of both hocks, and was non-weightbearing lame. Before being fired several months previously, it had been mildly stiff with typical signs of bilateral spavin. The owner was shown one of ACE's posters that illustrated in pictogram format how firing cripples horses. There was little more that could be done for his horse. ACE reports that, in the five years it has been using these posters and pamphlets, the incidence of firing has noticeably, albeit slowly, decreased. In countries like these, posters are as important as penicillin.

... EDUCATING MYSELF

Confronted with equine patients that don't read the books, with few diagnostic techniques at our disposal, no referral centre up the road and no senior partners to chat to over coffee, I relied heavily on one critical output of my veterinary training, and that was the capacity to take a logical, systematic and thorough approach, no matter what. This, combined with a passion for learning, kept me afloat through the early months that might otherwise have proved overwhelming. Creating a strategy for maximising clinical success was another essential part of the

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life raft. The book supply in the back of my car blossomed from a handful to a veritable library in the space of months. I became Amazon.com's most valued customer! I also relied on a few equine specialists who were patient and angelic enough to respond at length to endless telephone and e-mail queries. I pushed hard for appropriate diagnostic techniques and bored my colleagues in London with my wish list whenever I had an opportunity. The day we finally received an x-ray machine we celebrated as though we had been given the Moon.

GROWING CONFIDENCE

Over the years, as the confidence of the SPANA team increased, we began publishing and present-

The global situation for working equids

According to recent Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates, there are 15.5 million equids in the developed world. In comparison, there are over 100 million equids working in developing countries, 27 million of which are in Africa. Over 95 per cent of the world's donkey population and 60 per cent of the world's horse population is to be found in the developing world (Croxtton and others 1991). The US Congress Office of Technology has estimated that working animals are responsible for 75 per cent of traction energy in the developing world, while 50 per cent of the world's population depends on animal power as its main energy source (Wilson 2003).

The threats to the welfare and productivity of working animals are substantial and the economic effects of health challenges can be catastrophic to individual family units. The death of a mule (a year's wages) can spell financial ruin for the owner. Drought, extreme heat, poverty, ignorance, disease, increasing motorisation and increasing environmental pollution are risk factors that cause significant morbidity. Many of the welfare issues seen among this population of equids are the direct or indirect result of inadequate husbandry techniques and 'traditional' husbandry practices. Studies from various countries, including Mexico, Sudan and Ethiopia, confirm that poor husbandry leading to harness sores, wounds, foot problems and heavy worm burdens are the significant causes of compromised welfare (el Dirdiri and others 1986, Rodriguez-Maldonado 1991, Yilma and others 1991).

Addressing the health needs of these animals and their own-

ers has been an issue largely ignored by governmental and supranational bodies. It has fallen to the NGOs to take the lead in defining and implementing strategies of veterinary support in some of the world's most disadvantaged areas. The work involves not only the treatment of affected individuals, but also mass education and information campaigns to try to change established behaviour. In this way, husbandry techniques can be addressed and improved, and individual pathology can be treated. However, lack of owner resources remains a continual compromising factor.

Malnutrition is one of the most obvious pathologies among many working equids, and clearly has ramifications for all aspects of health and welfare. However, it is an extremely difficult issue to address among owners who barely earn enough to feed their children and families, and may themselves be suffering a degree of malnutrition. A recent survey of 4903 working equids from Pakistan, India, Jordan, Egypt and Afghanistan showed that approximately 70 per cent of animals were classed as 'very thin', having a body condition score of 2 or less on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very thin and 5 is very fat (Pritchard and others 2005). These figures indicate the scale of the problem faced by veterinary NGOs attempting to improve equine welfare and productivity in these countries.

NGOs: a global network of support and advice

Three NGOs work on an international scale providing a global network of veterinary care and advice to the owners of working



Boy and his donkey at a SPANA clinic in Chemaia, Morocco

ing on some of the more interesting and unrecorded pathologies. These included mule foals with bifid mandibles, standing caesarean sections on jenny donkeys carrying hinny foals, strange lobulated granulomatous ear lesions that appeared to be caused by *Cryptococcus neoformans*, mastocytomas on donkeys and, the definite icing on the cake, the case of a female mule that gave birth to a foal.

In 2006, the WEVA congress had, for the first time, three SPANA Moroccan and Malian vets giving presentations on their clinical research. This was witness to their

growing clinical confidence and acumen, and a source of immense private pleasure for me.

I left Morocco in 2005 with lots of backward glances and regrets for the huge number of friends that I had left behind. I now live and work in Qatar, and commute regularly to Luxor to work with ACE. This charity provides veterinary care to the many thousands of equids in Luxor, and the satisfaction I get from working with them and their owners is definitely worth the commute.

PERENNIAL QUESTIONS

There are two questions I'm invariably asked when talking about working in the developing world: first, how much discrimination do I receive as a woman working in these somewhat male-dominated societies?; secondly, how do I feel about the endless cruelty? The answer, paradoxically, is I saw and experienced very little of either. I have difficulty remembering a single incident where I received negative remarks or attitudes as a woman; in fact being a woman can be a positive asset in scenarios of conflict or tension, and that is just as true in the Middle East as anywhere. And

How to get involved

There are jobs for European veterinarians in both Africa and Asia with production animals, wildlife and, to a lesser extent, equids. Many of the larger NGOs, such as Oxfam and Save the Children, have occasional positions for vets. Some veterinary NGOs such as the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), as well as some European NGOs under the umbrella of Vétérinaires Sans Frontières, recruit veterinary surgeons. Success, however, would be unlikely without a grasp of the relevant language, and previous professional development/work experience. Many of the veterinary NGOs welcome volunteers for unspecified amounts of time: SPANA, Help In Suffering, Animal Care Egypt, the Gambia Trust and World Veterinary Services are among these and would be a definite first step for anyone interested in this immensely rewarding career path. An initial approach to the BVA Overseas Group would give any interested party a good overview of opportunities.

cruelty? I have encountered innumerable working animals that are in severe distress, overworked, cachectic and suffering from brutal wounds, as some of the pictures in this article portray, yet most of these situations are the product of poverty and lack of knowledge. It is extremely rare to see an owner inflict pain on his animal gratuitously. This perspective is important if one is to retain a sense of compassion for the owners as well as their animals.

equids and their animals – all are British based and are largely or wholly funded by public donations. SPANA, The Brooke Hospital for Animals and the Donkey Sanctuary share a common objective – that of improving the welfare of working equids and thereby achieving the goal of supporting the communities who depend on their productivity. While the details of their programmes differ, all three operate through a network of base clinics from which mobile clinics travel to outlying regions.

Way forward

Ensuring an adequate standard of welfare in the global population of working equids is a daunting task. It requires coordinated efforts, not only of the veterinary NGOs, but also all stakeholders with an interest in agricultural development in Africa and Asia.

Primary objectives should be to improve accessibility to both preventive husbandry education and to essential care for the common causes of morbidity and mortality within zones of heavy equid utilisation. Many countries within Africa and Asia still have no access to such support. Secondary objectives should focus on ensuring delivery of appropriate and effective care, including a choice of safe and effective drugs, appropriate equipment, sufficient veterinary and paraveterinary training, and adequate funding for the clinical case load.

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BVA Overseas Group
To contact the BVA Overseas Group, e-mail Helena Cotton helenac@bva.co.uk. Details of a number of overseas travel grants being offered by the BVA appear on page 91 of this issue.