

# Where have all the horse vets gone?

By Dr Mac | 10 September 2023 | 10:58 am

*Faced with an emergency with one of her own horses, Dr Mac experienced South Africa's shortage of equine veterinarians for herself.*



There is an increasing shortage of equine veterinarians in the world, due to the high costs of horse care.

*Photo: FW Archive*

Just before the long weekend in May, one of my fillies stopped eating and started salivating profusely. Her blood tests were positive for biliary fever (caused by *Theileria equi*, a protozoan) and she was anaemic.

As she is insured, I could not treat her myself, so I phoned colleagues to see who was available. Five phone calls later, I discovered that no veterinarians were available. Four had closed their practices. So I telephoned my insurance company's 24-hour helpline and asked permission to treat her myself. The consultant gave permission, but added that if the horse died, the company would not pay out.

The filly responded well to treatment over the weekend and started feeding again. However, two days later she was salivating profusely again and had difficulty swallowing. I managed to find a veterinarian about 50km away, but he said he was very busy and I would have to box her to his practice.

When I arrived, he examined her and said she should be referred to a veterinary hospital, another 50km away. When I arrived, the staff said the veterinarian was busy with surgery and referred me to an equine clinic 20km further on.

When I finally arrived, the vet on duty was out on call; however, the receptionist phoned him and he said the filly could be admitted for intensive care.

### **A worldwide problem**

This situation is not unique to South Africa; unavailability of equine practitioners has become a worldwide problem. The shortage is partly linked to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Owning and maintaining an equine clinic is both expensive and time-consuming. Rent and salaries have gone up and the cost of medicines, many of which are imported, have soared. The debt burden has forced some equine veterinarians out of practice, while others have migrated into small-animal practice.

As equine practices shut down or lose veterinarians, unfavourable working hours and working conditions faced by those remaining in practice have resulted in fewer equine practices being willing to offer emergency services after hours.

In the US, a survey has shown that only about 5% of veterinary graduates choose to enter equine practice, and about half will leave equine practice within five years. The majority of equine veterinarians remaining in practice are over 50 and are not being replaced by new graduates. This may also be a problem in South Africa.

As a horse owner, you need be able to transport your horse to hospital in an emergency. You should also keep in touch with your equine vet through Facebook or WhatsApp, so you know whether the practice is still operating.