

Make the Most of Your Local Veterinary Resources

By Sheila Scroggins

The cost of veterinary services can be one of the most prohibitive expenses for the alpaca owner and breeder. During this recession, we all know alpaca sales are down, but expenses can be up. During these times, any way to save on costs would be welcome by any alpaca owner. One novel way to cut some of the costs is to allow veterinary technician students to provide some of the services that you would typically have your veterinarian, or paid ranch help, provide. Especially those once a year type of services you need completed for your entire herd.

Today, veterinary technicians play an increasingly important role in the veterinary field. They are now performing a variety of clinical and technical tasks in veterinary offices, hospitals, clinics, research labs, shelters and other veterinary venues. If you have not already had experience with veterinary technicians you probably will. Each year, more and more veterinarians are utilizing technicians to help deliver health care to their animal patients. My horses' teeth are floated by a veterinarian technician employed by UC Davis Animal Clinic. The veterinarian comes to give the sedations and the technician takes over and completes the floating procedure.

We at Colusa Riverside Alpacas have as our mission the promotion of education about alpacas. In keeping with our educational philosophy, we forged an educational partnership with the Yuba College Veterinary Technician Program. In forging this relationship we kept to our mission, promoted our business, and saved on the medical care of our alpacas. Dr. Scott Haskell, DVM and Colusa Riverside Alpacas joined together to furnish Yuba College Veterinary Technician students with experience in some of the fundamental health care needs of the alpaca. I can't emphasize enough how rewarding this experience was, not only for the students, but also for us.

I believe it is possible for many owners to also form partnerships with their local college veterinary technician programs. These educational relationships can prove to be a benefit for all involved, especially the alpaca. Collaborations provide valuable experience with the alpaca for students who would otherwise never have the opportunity. These technicians could someday be responsible for handling and aiding in the treatments of your alpacas. I have no doubt each student will have taken from their experience at our ranch, knowledge about the alpaca that will serve them well in their careers.

I am a teacher, so for me this collaboration seemed like an ideal arrangement, and I wanted to be involved in the teaching. I do understand, however, others may not feel as comfortable with students, nor feel comfortable teaching. Dr. Haskell of Yuba College was previously a veterinarian for U.C Davis Veterinary School and had experience with camelids. Thusly, even if I was not available or needed in helping students, Dr. Haskell would have been equipped to complete all the teaching. It could be possible that a program director may have little experience with camelids, requiring you the owner, to participate extensively with the teaching. Because of differing levels of knowledge with programs about the alpaca, I believe one priority is to contact your local college program veterinarian director to meet and discuss what kind of experience you both want, and the types of experience you could each offer. Ultimately, I believe, the success of any collaboration depends on the development of a good working relationship between you and the veterinarian program director. Having the director see you in a trustworthy light will provide a safe and fertile learning environment for his or her students.

The day the students came began with me giving a demonstration on how to



catch, lead and halter fit the alpaca. A brief safety explanation was also given on how to prevent stress to the animal and, of course, safety for the student. Next, we set up three stations in the barn for treatment of each alpaca with the students divided into smaller groups of four or five students. It is imperative that you, as the breeder, be well prepared for what examination or treatment is needed for each alpaca. Dr. Haskell had the students teamed up with each group mixed with first year students and second year students to make sure each group had some experienced students.

I had prepared index cards on each alpaca that provided a description of the animal and all the medical treatments it required. All the information on the cards was given to Dr. Haskell well in advance which allowed all treatments to be agreed upon and all necessary supplies gathered. This is probably the most important preparatory step. Next year, I am going to place a small picture of the alpaca on the card, so no mistaking of animals occurs. Though this did not occur it could easily happen with a look-alike alpaca. It would also help if the card were attached to the appropriate alpaca.

All the animals had a full examination and almost all received some type of injection or vaccine, whether it was Vitamin D or West Nile. All the babies

were chipped, and many of the babies had blood draws for blood cards. Many of the adults had their molar teeth floated and, of course, their toenails clipped. All the pregnant females got abdominal ultrasounds whether they needed it or not. That was the really fun exercise for the students. The students even did some work on my horses.

Of course, the local college must be able to make farm visits as part of their program. There may be some costs to the owner for the treatment of their animals. For example, I had all of my alpaca vaccinated by the students, so the veterinarian ordered some of the vaccines, but I was responsible for the cost of those vaccines and any other medications used during the ranch visit. These were the only costs to me, although other colleges may have differing policies on charges. An added benefit is that any costs incurred for the experience, in most cases, is considered a charitable donation.

You can usually locate veterinarian technician programs by going online. For example, to locate a program in California, the State provides a list of all licensed programs at the State website, <http://www.vmb.ca.gov>. Most programs are provided by community colleges in California, although in completing an online search for college programs I did

come across four-year colleges with programs. Private colleges, such as Western Career College, have numerous veterinarian technician programs in a number of states.

We benefited so much from this experience. Everyone had a lot of fun, and the collaboration promoted our business. Dr. Haskell and I both agreed to put something about the experience on each of our websites. We all had an incredibly time and we had some extremely valuable help for a day. Most importantly, veterinary technician students learned how to give medical care to the alpaca, the best way possible, and that is with hands on experience.

You too can partner in your community with educational institutions on a personal business level. Or, if you don't want a ranch visit, your business could benefit by becoming a volunteer in some way to promote the alpaca. I suggest a web search for your local colleges and their programs, and make contact to offer ranch visits, volunteer your animals, or even yourself, to help out in these program.

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About the Author

Sheila is a Nurse Practitioner and a Professor for Yuba College in Marysville, California. Having years of experience as a health professional has given her an appreciation of the health problems associated with her new alpaca herd. Her articles are drawn not only from her experience as a nurse practitioner, but also from her understanding of animal husbandry in the alpaca. Sheila and her husband David have been raising equines for over twenty years and recently became owner/breeders of huacaya alpacas in Northern California. Colusa Riverside Alpacas is located in the middle of the Sacramento Valley along the Sacramento River. Please visit them at their website: <http://www.colusariversidealpacas.com>



Half of this class graduated in the Spring semester of this year with the remaining students due to graduate in Spring 2011