Notes From The Field – Vaccinations
by Cindy Sullivan

Because I am not a veterinarian, I cannot legally advise owners on veterinary matters. BUT….I do it anyway. Yes, I did just put that in writing, and No, I don’t care.

What follows is another series of “Round-penning the human” - the term I use for a process I use when talking to people about issues with the horse about which I know they are, or are likely to be, in opposition. I know the common reasons why people do what they do, but instead of simply lecturing them on my opposing viewpoint, I push them to defend their belief through a series of questions. With this process, I find that eventually they stop and stand quietly looking at me (just like a horse eventually does in the round pen) as they realize, though trying to defend their position, that their belief may not be valid. Additionally, they often come to realize that they don’t even know WHY they believe what they do. It’s usually a case of accepting “common practice” without understanding it, or even questioning it. It’s just “what everyone says to do.”

Here are some examples of exchanges I have with people on the subject of vaccinations:
O= owner C = Cindy

Owner proudly reports that her horses are vaccinated twice a year for everything for which there is a vaccine.
C – So, you believe that the more frequently that you vaccinate, the better protected they are?
O – Absolutely! Those diseases are out there and we travel to a lot of trails and shows.
C – What vaccinations did you get when you were a child?
O – The usual … mumps, measles, etc…
C – Are those diseases still out there?
O – “Well, yes…”
C – Why don’t you get those vaccines every year?
O – Uh… <blank stare>

Often at this point I will go on to explain that the reason humans are not repeatedly vaccinated for “childhood” diseases is because it would amount to medical malpractice given the impact to the immune system and the increase in autoimmune disorders that would result.

Owner is a young mother with a 3 month old baby. She also has a mare in foal.
O - I make sure she has all her vaccinations and get the Rhino vaccine every two months through her pregnancy.
C – Why do you give her Rhino?
O – Because the baby needs to have the immunity from the mother, so if the mother has the vaccines, the baby will be protected.
C – How many vaccines did you have when you were pregnant with your child?
O – Well….none.
C – Why not?
O – Uh….<blank stare>

Owner is concerned about over vaccinating, but is afraid not to give the WNV vaccine.
O: I don’t really like to give a lot of vaccinations to my horses and we never take them anywhere anyway, but I am afraid not to give the West Nile vaccine. My vet insists that they need it, even if they never leave the farm.
C – Why is that?
O - Because its transmitted by mosquitoes.
C – Do you know that people can catch the West Nile virus?
O – Yes.
C – Do you ever get bitten by mosquitoes?
O – Oh yeah…we have a lot of them in the summer.
C – How many WNV vaccinations do you get?
O – Uh…..<blank stare>

Average owner, general conversation turns to vaccines.
O – I give just the basic vaccines to my horses; one I think is important is tetanus.
C – How often do you give it?
O – At least every year, sometimes twice a year.
C – When was your last tetanus shot?
O – I don’t remember…aren’t they good for 10 years?
C - <say nothing …just wait>
O – Oh….!

Occasionally arguments are launched to point out to me that we are talking about horses, not humans. This is most common when making the point to veterinarians who think I’m an idiot for not wanting to vaccinate. When that happens, I point out that both horses and humans are mammals…its not like we are comparing mammals to reptiles. If a vet is going to make the case that my argument regarding potential harm to humans through over vaccinating does not translate over to horses (or dogs, or cats for that matter) I will say, “If you are going to make the case that the physiology is so vastly different between mammals, then all of the animal testing companies do for human drugs would be irrelevant.”

I have never had to continue beyond that. They either get mad and stop off…or, if they are intellectually honest, they stop and stare as the argument sinks in…they have been “round penned.”

Taking the subject to another area where I have concerns is in regard to the rabies vaccine for horses. Over the course of my working life, I worked for a number of years as a vet tech with primarily dogs and cats and it was somewhere during that time when the “3 year” rabies vaccine came out. Since I worked in the “back” with the vets directly, I observed that the one year rabies vaccine and the three year rabies vaccine are drawn from the same vial. They are the exact same shot. The only difference was in the certificate that was issued, a one year certificate, or a three year certificate. Why, I wondered, was the same shot that we were all told back then had to be given annually, was now good for three years? No answers. Ask your vet …if he/she is honest with you, they will tell you that it’s still the same case today. Perhaps in response to consumer pressure I am now hearing this explanation:

The first rabies vaccine is good for one year. Follow-up boosters are good for three years.

Perhaps.
Anyway, back then was when I first started wondering about the validity of annual vaccinations for animals. Then I added in the ponderings I have mentioned about why it is that humans don’t require revaccinating their entire lives.

Now add in the recent phenomenon of vaccinating horses for rabies. Not very long ago it was unheard of for horses. I don’t know when it actually became the “norm” but it doesn’t pass critical thinking muster…not with me. Here’s my thinking…why do horses suddenly need rabies vaccines? They are prey animals that, if faced with a rabid aggressive animal, would RUN from it, not engage it like a dog would! If the argument is only because they are exposed to the possibility that maybe someday a rabid animal will stagger in and bite them out in the pasture, why aren’t the millions of cattle routinely given rabies shots? Why not sheep? Goats? Why don’t veterinary workers (techs and vets themselves) get annual rabies vaccines? They are far more likely, in the course of their jobs, to be exposed than a horse!

These are the types of thing you should ask yourself. Begin with the question, “Just why is it that I believe this should be done?” Do you even know, or is it just because it’s “what’s done”??