

## Evaluating the Credentials of Your Veterinarian

Unfortunately, Consumer Reports has yet to publish on the comparative value of veterinarians. So, how do you best go about choosing one? Most people rely on what they hear on the equine grapevine. And like any grapevine, some of what you hear may be good information and some may be very poor. Trainers often make recommendations based on previous experiences and an established relationship with a veterinarian, and this can be helpful information, but again, it can be purely anecdotal. However, as in all things, it's really best to do a little bit of research for yourself before placing your valued equine companion's health and soundness in any individual's hands.

One of the best criteria upon which to evaluate veterinarians is their education and training. All veterinarians must graduate from a four year veterinary school, and must pass a national board exam to practice in the United States. The Oregon Veterinary Examining Board is charged with certifying (licensing) veterinarians and if consumers lodge complaints against veterinarians, these are publicly available. A veterinarian with one or more complaints should be considered carefully. More information is available at <http://www.oregon.gov/OVMEB/index.shtml>. Veterinarians with numerous infractions can have their licenses retracted.

There is a broad spectrum of training options above and beyond the minimum of veterinary school and a state license. Veterinarians who wish to specialize and hone their skills further following graduation may wish to perform an internship. Some of you may be familiar with internships, as almost all physicians (MDs) perform these—fans of Gray's Anatomy will especially know what we're talking about! An internship is a one year long training program, usually completed immediately following graduation from veterinary school, and hosted by either a veterinary school or a high caliber private practice. During this year, the newly-graduated veterinarian gains immense hands on skills and knowledge in a controlled environment with good mentorship. Typically formal internship programs cover lameness, dentistry, surgery, reproduction, ophthalmology, etc. Completion of an internship indicates that a veterinarian is dedicated to developing their skills, since interns are typically paid much less during that year than what they would otherwise make, and work very long hours. More and more equine veterinarians are completing an internship prior to entering practice, since veterinary school provides limited access and hands on opportunities in equine veterinary medicine. The American Association of Equine Practitioners supervise equine internship programs: <http://www.aaep.org>.

Residency programs are yet another level of training that veterinarians can undertake. An internship is a prerequisite for admission to the highly competitive residency programs. Residency programs are typically 3-4 years in length and specialize in one of the following: surgery, internal medicine, or reproduction. A residency is a rigorous and highly regulated training program with specific requirements, regulated by a national body. For example, the American College of Veterinary Surgeons (ACVS) regulates surgery residencies. Residents must have proven that they can competently perform specific surgeries and have undergone additional academic training and completed research prior to successfully completing a residency. Following successful completion of a residency program, the resident can take a difficult board examination; if they pass, they become "board-certified." A very small minority of equine veterinarians are board-certified due to the difficulty and rigorous standards

involved. Veterinarians certified in Surgery have excellent skills in not only surgery, but also sportsmedicine/lameness, as this is considered to fall underneath the umbrella of “surgery”. See [www.acvs.org](http://www.acvs.org) for more information.

And, we all know education does not end once you’ve finished your formal training, no matter what field you’re in. Check to see if your veterinarian attends high quality continuing education programs each year. The two best equine continuing education programs in the world are the American Association of Equine Practitioners Annual Meeting and the American College of Veterinary Surgeons Annual Veterinary Symposium. Regular attendance at these high quality meetings and others indicate that your veterinarian wants to stay current on the latest medical information and trends. Otherwise, in a field that’s constantly-evolving with new medical techniques and knowledge, it’s easy to get left behind.

So, please do your homework. Your veterinarian should be proud to discuss their qualifications with you—feel free to ask them. And don’t make assumptions about price. Although more specialized, higher quality veterinary care may be a bit more expensive, you may be surprised by a) how little cost difference there is, and b) how much savings there are simply in choosing the most appropriate testing/procedures first, rather than going a more circuitous and ultimately more expensive route based on less experienced or skilled advice.