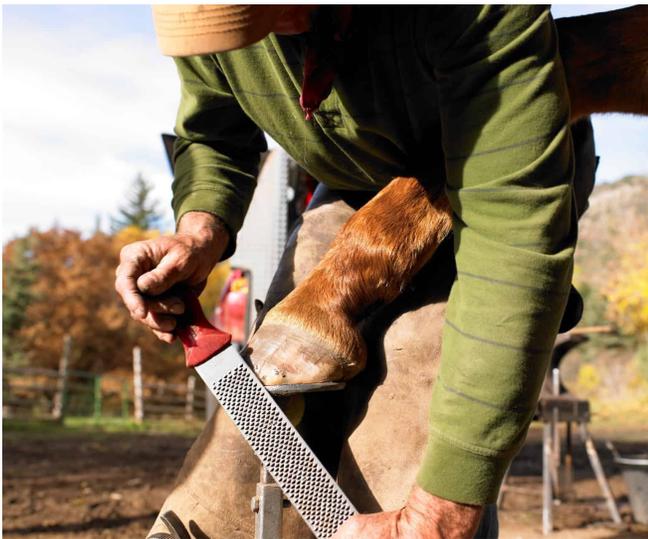


# Farrier, Horse Owner Interactions Key When Managing Laminitis

A psychologist documented and assessed a holistic farrier's complex communication skills while handling a laminitis case.

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Posted by Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA | May 20, 2020 | Farrier Issues, Hoof Care, Hoof Problems, Horse Care, Lameness, Laminitis (Founder), Welfare and Industry



According to a new study, communication skills and relationship-building between farrier and client can play a vital role in the horse's recovery. | Photo: iStock

Farrier skill is critical when it comes to managing horses with **laminitis**—a hoof disease that causes the laminae (the tissues that suspend the coffin bone within the hoof capsule) to become damaged and inflamed. But it's not just practical trimming and treatment abilities that matter. According to a new study, communication skills and relationship-building between farrier and client can play a vital role in the horse's recovery.

Respecting owners' expertise and knowledge about their horses and

maintaining open dialogue with body language to encourage “partnership” are key elements in good farrier-client communication, said Jenny Lynden, PhD, CPsychol SFHEA, staff tutor and lecturer in psychology at The Open University's School of Psychology and Counselling, in Milton Keynes, U.K.

## Holistic Farrier Care and “Partnership”

Because laminitis isn't just a hoof disease, but rather a "whole horse" illness affecting the feet, the farrier-client partnership can be critical in disease management, said Lynden.

"As we know, **endocrinopathic laminitis** (that which is related to systemic endocrine disorders) has multiple risk factors, including changes in horse weight and obesity, and it's important to recognize potential signs of underlying conditions such as **pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID)** and **equine metabolic syndrome (EMS)**," she said.

Farriers offering holistic care—meaning they support owners in caring for the whole horse—focus on the importance of nutrition, use, and environment. Not all farriers provide holistic care, said Lynden, and not all clients look for such services from their farriers, she added. But when they do, good communication skills can lead to better support for the laminitic horse.

In her recent study, Lynden closely analyzed the one-hour consultation of a holistic farrier working with the owners of a horse recovering from a laminitic episode. The farrier was one of several involved in her previous study on farrier-client interactions. She watched how the farrier adapted vocabulary, adjusted body language, solicited ideas from the clients, and included the horse in the discussion.

"Rather than being 'directive' by giving lots of advice and guidance, the farrier involved his clients in reflecting on and exploring the problems they were facing with their horse, giving them space to air their concerns and worries, as well as identify their own 'evidence base' for next steps in their horse's recovery process," she said.

## **Sophisticated Communication Skills**

As she had expected (based on results of her previous study interviewing farriers alone), Lynden said that during the video-recorded consultation she observed "very sophisticated communication skills, including using vocabulary-matching (matching explanations to meet the horse owner's level of education, competence, or interest in horse management), humor (including to challenge horse owner perceptions of their horse's weight), and the use of analogies using everyday examples, or visual aids, to explain complex physiological structures and processes associated with laminitis."

What she found particularly interesting, she said, was "just how effectively the farrier engaged in partnership working using incredibly complex communication skills."

She described, for example, how the farrier addressed the client question of the "next step"—in this case, letting the horse have turnout. "Rather than taking the position of an expert and offering advice and guidance, the farrier redirected the question back to his clients," Lynden

said. "This opened up an important space to explore the clients' perceptions and aired their concerns about their horse's journey to recovery. By doing this, the farrier recognized and respected his clients' expertise as well as their concerns about their horse's progress."

Lynden admitted she was surprised to see that the farrier was also employing communication techniques that are common in human and small-animal medicine but haven't yet been reported in equine care.

"The consultation followed a three-stage process beginning with 'team talk,' followed by 'option talk,' and ending with 'decision-talk,'" she said. "Additionally, both the farrier and clients 'invoked' the horse's presence to explore and resolve more challenging issues. This technique has been identified as being used in small animal veterinary contexts, but not equine veterinary care or farriery contexts."

## **The Valuable Role of Good Communication**

Such communication skills are valuable in all areas of equine care, said Lynden, adding that she can attest to this both professionally and personally.

"As a horse owner myself I have always understood the value of my farrier's support, particularly in highlighting issues and/or changes I may have missed or answering my questions or concerns about changes in my horses' hooves," she said. "I consider my equine vet, farrier, and physiotherapist to be very important team members in the care of my horses, and for me, especially as my horses get older, it's essential that they are able to use a facilitative and problem-solving approach so we can share information and decide on the best treatment and care plans together.

"I hope the research I've undertaken provides an evidence base for just how effectively farriers can contribute to the equine care team and use very sophisticated communication skills they can offer when working in teams."