

British
Equine
Veterinary
Association
Trust



The pre-purchase examination of horses

Jeremy Mantell BVetMed CertEP MRCVS

The Liphook Equine Hospital

Forest Mere, Liphook

Hampshire

GU30 7JG

After qualifying from the Royal Veterinary College in 1976, Jeremy worked in a number of different practices in Kent, Northumberland, East Anglia and on Exmoor before moving, 'for 2 years', to Liphook where he is now senior partner at the 17 vet and 50 support staff Liphook Equine Hospital, which provides both a local first opinion and a nationwide referral service and has stabling for up to 50 in-patients.

Jeremy's main professional interests are in first opinion care, the pre-purchase examination of horses and management issues. He served as President of the British Equine Veterinary Association in 1998 and is currently both a Trustee of the BEVA Trust and Chairman of the profession's Review of the Pre-purchase Examination of Horses.

Outside the practice his time has been spent as a reserve officer in the 16th/5th The Queen's Royal Lancers, as a member of the Jockey Club Veterinary Committee, as an Expert Witness in cases involving horse accidents and personal injury and, more importantly, as a Pony Club groom and taxi driver.

The purchase of any horse involves an element of risk; no horse is risk free and, at best, we as vets can use our expertise and experience to advise you, the potential purchaser, of the additional risks that may be involved if you decide to buy the horse that you have already selected.

It is the role of the pre-purchase examination (PPE) to provide additional information, of a medical nature, to the prospective purchaser so that you can then make a more informed decision as to whether or not you should proceed with your chosen purchase.

The aim of the PPE has been described as ***‘to carry out a thorough and complete veterinary examination of the chosen horse and to identify and attempt to assess those factors of a veterinary nature that may affect the horse’s suitability for its intended use, so that the prospective purchaser may make an informed decision as to whether or not to proceed with their chosen purchase’***.

We cannot gaze into the future with horses any more than we can, for example, with marriages but at a PPE we can, and do, hope to identify and assess those factors that may affect the horse’s suitability to perform your chosen and intended use.

Horses are no longer examined for ‘soundness’, nor are they either ‘passed’ or ‘failed’ but, rather, they are examined thoroughly and then the relevance of any defects, illnesses or injuries assessed with specific regard to the intended use of that horse for that purchaser. Whilst all horses will, in the main, undergo a similar PPE the results may then be interpreted differently, according to the purchaser’s intentions. Thus a horse, after a veterinary examination, may well be considered suitable for purchase for, say, dressage but not, necessarily, for hunting.

The standard PPE is carried out in 5 distinct stages, hence the colloquial terms of the 5-stage, or 5 star, vetting. These different stages are intended to examine the horse as thoroughly as a clinical examination will allow and to assess the horse’s current health at rest, exercise and then following rest after exercise. The examination can never include everything (such as, for example, pregnancy or, perhaps, the ability to stay 3 miles) but it can, and does, help to identify the more likely causes of potential problems. As will be shown and discussed during the presentation, the PPE covers a wide range of clinical techniques and these may, on some occasions, be supplemented by additional diagnostic techniques such as X-raying.

Purchasers who choose to instruct their vet to carry out a ‘Limited PPE’ or 2-stage vetting must be aware that such an examination is indeed limited and, by definition

therefore, may very well not detect potential problems that would have been found on a full, 5-stage PPE.

Purchasers should also be aware of the important difference between a horse's suitability for purchase and its suitability, or otherwise, for insurance. The veterinary decision is a balanced one and is the veterinary surgeon's considered opinion as to whether, or not, the detected problems are likely to affect the horse's suitability for its intended use. The insurance underwriters will be looking to see whether the horse is 'perfect' or not and, if not, they may very well add exclusions or indeed decline cover. Thus, as will be shown, horses may and often do 'pass the vet' but still fail to be fully insurable. As a golden rule, if insurance is important to you as a purchaser, **ensure that you can obtain satisfactory cover for your purchase after the vetting but before you actually make the purchase.**

The current format for the PPE was introduced in the mid 1970s and was revised in the 1980s; although it has stood the test of time remarkably well, we now live in a different society, with different experiences and expectations compared to a generation ago and that is why the veterinary profession is currently carrying out a review of the PPE. The results have yet to be published but, in the main, the format will stay the same albeit with some additions. These will be discussed. What is perhaps unexpected in this increasingly litigious society, where every bad decision to buy a horse must be somebody else's fault, is that we as vets have decided to continue to provide a straightforward opinion as to the horse's suitability, or not, rather than hide behind a checklist of findings and then leave the final conclusion to the purchaser. Anybody who has had a horse vetted on the continent, or perhaps had a house surveyed, will know that that method does not necessarily make the decision-making process any easier.

Other hot topics that will also be discussed include passports, ageing, flexion tests, blood sampling and the possible new vendor's declaration and warranty.

A better understanding of the rationale of the PPE will assist the potential purchaser to see both the benefits and the limitations of the exercise but will, hopefully, assist them to find that marvellous horse we all hope for.

The PPE is not intended to be, nor can it ever be, a guarantee of a horse's future health and performance – there is, unfortunately, no crystal ball! It can and does, however, help you to avoid the 'bad 'un' rather more easily than it will find you the 'good 'un'. After all, we only vet the horse that you have already chosen.