

# LET'S GO TO PRISON: A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN TEXAS A&M AND TDCJ

**T**uesday, August 17, 2010, four veterinary students and their professor went to prison...to perform equine dentistry on the horses within the prison system. This two-week elective rotation is offered through Large Animal Clinical Services at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine (CVM) as a partnership between A&M and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). The veterinary students have been traveling to the prison to perform veterinary services on a regular basis since 1968, according to Dan Posey, DVM, director of special programs and a clinical associate professor at A&M. Even before that, as early as 1964, veterinarians from A&M were visiting various prisons for emergency purposes. The veterinary students currently travel to the prisons to perform equine dentistry and other types of procedures on various types of animals under the supervision of licensed veterinarian-instructors.

"Equine dentistry is only one of the numerous opportunities veterinary students profit from because of working with TDCJ and CVM," said Glennon Mays, DVM, a clinical assistant professor at A&M who supervises the students who perform equine dentistry on these trips. Dr. Mays has been involved with the TAMU and TDCJ partnership for two and a half years.

TDCJ's agricultural operations, in place to help feed the state's inmate population as economically as possible, are among the largest and most diversified in the nation. TDCJ also utilizes available offender labor to reduce cost of operations while providing them with the opportunity for job skill and work-ethic training to increase their employment opportunities after release. TDCJ operates and manages approximately

By Kelly E. Lindner

145,337 acres in 47 counties throughout Texas and has more than 10,000 cows, 20,000 swine, 300,000 laying hens used for egg production, 1,600 dogs for security and 1,600 horses in the system. The horses are primarily used for security operations when monitoring inmates working outdoors. Some horses are also used as stock horses in the beef cattle production operations.

## IT PROVIDES EXCELLENT VETERINARY SERVICES FOR ANIMALS AND, IN RETURN, STUDENTS GET HANDS ON TRAINING

Needless to say, TDCJ has significant animal resources and thus a significant need for veterinary services.

On a typical day to the prison, the students meet early in the morning at the parking lot of the Large Animal Hospital at Texas A&M and travel to one of the TDCJ facilities. They ride together in a 4-door pick-up truck with up to three people to each bench-seat.

The students, who typically wear coveralls, are asked not to bring personal items that you'd expect not to be allowed on prison property.

"Previous classes told us that it's one of the best classes to take," said Amanda Lust, a student who's interested in going into large animal practice. "It's a good rotation to get a lot of repetition and really learn how to do something."

Students can take this popular two-week rotation in their fourth year of veterinary school.

"This is a good opportunity for students to think on their feet and not hide behind their clinician," said Dr. Mays, who describes himself as merely a chauffeur. "I get the students from the school house to the prison and then *hopefully* back the same day."

Though Dr. Mays may consider himself a chauffeur, it should be noted that he has 30 years of experience in equine dentistry. "That's what's so great about this program at Texas A&M," said Dr. Posey. "You're always a few steps away from a specialist who can help you."

There are two other professors for the program, Lewis Dinges, DVM, and Brandon Dominguez, DVM. Dr. Dinges, a clinical assistant professor at A&M, serves as the current director and has been involved with the TDCJ program since 2001.

"It also feels to the students like there's less liability," said Dr. Dinges. "If they were to perform these procedures at a private practice, there would be a great deal of paperwork to sign first, but through this partnership that isn't necessary. This makes the students more comfortable to perform these procedures while still learning. Also they don't have to worry about any clients looking on or interfering, which could also make them feel more pressured." However, TDCJ personnel are always on-site to assist and oversee the various procedures performed on the agency's livestock.

"This situation is a win-win," said Brandon Dominguez, DVM, the other clinical assistant professor from A&M who began with this program in May 2010. "It provides excellent veterinary services for animals and, in return, students get hands on training and a chance to make decisions. Basically whatever they do in mixed practice, we do here."

On this particular day, Drs. Dominguez

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Photo by Kelly E. Lindner

Equine dentistry performed by A&M students on prison property

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and Dinges took their own set of veterinary students to palpate cows.

On the road, to and from the facilities, the truck becomes a classroom. Sometimes there are quizzes about which procedure would be necessary for a described situation. Sometimes there are questions about which drugs should be administered and case scenarios.

“What does anisognathia mean?” Dr. Mays asks the four veterinary students. Several answers are given that are approximately correct. Dr. Mays informs them that the simple answer is

In an open-air hospital barn, the students perform their work. They say they want to help as many horses as they can during their visit. The group that came the week before performed routine equine dentistry on sixteen horses, which is four horses per student. Performing routine equine dentistry can take up to three hours per horse. This time, they even brought a portable stock (towed by the A&M pick-up) so a fourth student could work on horses as well, since it is such a popular rotation. There are only three stocks in the barn.

Paul Schmitt, a student interested in mixed

the experience they gain here.

Amanda Lust begins her examination on the horse’s mouth. The elongated space inside is sharp in some areas and grooved in others. It should all be smooth.

One inmate helps Stephanie Foster, a student interested in pursuing a career in small animal practice, apply suspension ropes for the head and a full mouth speculum.

The interactions between the inmates and the students are very professional. The inmates are polite and helpful while the students are very courteous and fearless.

“The trustees enjoy the work, they learn a lot, and it’s good for them to work with the students and the animals,” said Shannon Tullos, an agricultural specialist for the horse program within TDCJ.

“They get to witness the human-animal bond and the importance of animals in our society,” said Dr. Posey.

The students do the following things to each horse: collect blood to test for Equine Infectious Anemia, perform a mouth assessment, extract any wolf teeth, file down the sharp points of the teeth and put dewormer directly into the horse’s stomach with the use of a stomach tube.

When it’s time to file down the teeth, each of the students uses a power float and spends a great deal of time sanding down the sharp points of the teeth to make the horses more comfortable. They’re also careful to have their work checked by Dr. Mays to make sure they’re not filing the teeth too little or too much.

If necessary, the veterinarians perform other procedures for the horses outside of dentistry. The previous week they corrected five or six hernias and scheduled the correction of two more for the following week.

At 3 p.m. the veterinary students have worked six hours straight without a break for lunch or even to sit down. They performed equine dentistry on eight horses total, each treating two horses a piece. They pack all their supplies back into the foldout compartments in the back of the truck and clean up the areas they were working. They pile back into the pick-up and munch down on snacks they grabbed for the ride back to A&M. They discuss fondly all the types of practices and locations they’d consider working at in the future. Two are still extremely interested in large animal dentistry. Two believe that small animal practice is the place for them. Either way, they’re excited about their first day of hands-on equine dentistry and look forward to the rest of their TDCJ rotation. **TV**



Photo by Kelly E. Lindner

“When the bottom jaw is narrower than the top jaw.” According to Dr. Mays, this characteristic is normal for horses, which causes sharp points to form on their cheek teeth.

Texas A&M provides veterinary services to prison units throughout Texas on a regular basis, though the ones in the Panhandle or South Texas area don’t get as much attention from A&M because of the distance. (Emergency services for these areas are provided by local veterinarians if needed.) Dr. Mays states that they visit those areas annually primarily for vaccinations but tend to stay for longer amounts of time to evaluate and help as many animals as possible. Most trips made by Texas A&M are day trips to TDCJ operations in the Huntsville, Palestine, or Brazoria areas. “It’s pretty common for us to spread ourselves between all the prisons in this area during a two-week rotation,” said Dr. Mays.

animal practice, mans the portable stock that day, which is a learning experience in itself. It comes equipped with a pneumatic float (an air-powered float) that Schmitt says he hasn’t had a chance to use in the past; his experience has been with electric power floats. It also comes with a special kind of mouth speculum that opens the horse’s mouth to the side instead of straight on.

Inside the barn, trustee inmates lead the horses into the stocks before a veterinary student applies sedation. Many of the inmates appear to have assisted students in this capacity several times, while most of the students are performing these procedures for the first time. Anytime during the procedures that a horse becomes restless or uneasy, an inmate comes over and easily calms them with a soft “whooha.”

According to Dr. Posey, some of these inmates go on to have jobs as ranch hands because of