

The Business of Practice: Parenting Tips for Equine Veterinarians

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Kim Brown: Welcome to this episode of The Business of Practice podcast, where we focus on the fiscal, financial and human sides of equine veterinary medicine. In this episode, we're talking about parenting tips for equine veterinarians, with Barb Crabbe, DVM, owner of Pacific Crest Sport Horse in Oregon. Dr. Crabbe lives on the Pacific Crest Sport Horse farm property with her husband, Bob who's a board-certified veterinary internist, and two daughters, Katie and Jamie.

This episode of The Business of Practice podcast is brought to you by Dechra Veterinary Products. Thank you for joining us today on The Business of Practice podcast, Dr. Crabbe.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. Thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to it.

Kim Brown: Well, we know that years ago, women were discouraged from going to veterinary school.

I'm one of those women. Especially if they had an interest in mixed or equine practice. Today, the majority of veterinary students are women and those women want to practice great medicine while also having family life. And the same is true for the men who are today graduating from vet school. So, let's start out by talking about how has the role of women in vet practice changed over the years?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Oh, my gosh, it's changed so much. And certainly, being discouraged from going to veterinary school is nothing new to all of us who've been out in practice for a long time. When I was actually, I had always wanted to go to vet school as a kid. And when I was in high school in a smaller town in Colorado, my high school counselor pulled me into the office with my mother who was a fireball and said "gosh, I'm sorry, I know she wants to go to vet school but girls just don't go to vet school" at which point my mom said, "Oh, just wait and see." So that was kind of the end of that. And then, yeah, when I went to UC Davis, I graduated in 1989 and I was in the first class that was more than 50% women. So, I think we all know now that number has gotten up to where women certainly dominate the profession and we're seeing a lot more women practice owners not just being associates.

Just, there's just a lot more opportunities.

Kim Brown: Well, tell me a little bit about when you first went out into practice and you actually had a family. How did that work for you?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Well, I started I waited a little while before I did have a family, so I came out, I did an internship and then got married after my internship. And I worked for about, well, I worked for three years for someone else before I kind of struck out on my own. And at that point I was doing the typical solo practice in a truck, just me and I had a gal in my office, and I came home every night cause there were no cell phones really, and returned phone calls until 10 o'clock and then did it all over again.

And that's what I was doing when I got pregnant with my first child. So I didn't have a lot of opportunities to you know, turn it over to the associates. And I literally worked up until the day before my baby was born and I took a week off and had a friend who helped me cover calls during the time.

And then I went right back to work with a baby and a nanny in my truck. So, my, my oldest daughter, who's 22 now spent the first year of her life riding around in the truck with me with a nanny and when she started to cry, the nanny would take her off behind the barn and I would keep doing my thing.

So that's how it worked.

Kim Brown: That's honestly, I've heard so many stories of veterinarians is that's, you know, it's, you know, how you have to do it, if that's where you are in that age of your stage of your practice.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. It was funny, actually, I, during that time, I remember one client who said to me when I was there with the baby and the whole nine yards and said, "you know, do you have clients who don't like that? Who like won't tolerate it?" And I said, well, you know, what? If if they don't like this, then they, I'm not the right veterinarian for them. And you just kind of had to build your practice around that.

Kim Brown: So how, since you're you have babies in the truck, how do you think that has changed coming up to today's practice

Dr. Barb Crabbe: As far as how people are doing it now?

Kim Brown: Yeah.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. So, I mean, I think there, there are fewer probably people who go out just hit the road in a truck. A lot more people are working in groups or working with other people. And I know, so I have an associate who has worked for me for 17 years and she has two kids who are quite a bit younger than mine. So she had her kids when she was working for me. And she was able to take six weeks off to be at home with them. And that honestly, that's probably one of the things that I do regret. It was my, really, my only choice with both of my kids was that I really didn't have, I mean, I literally took a week off with both of them because I was it and I had to be back at work.

I wished that I'd had that time when they were really little, but I think the trade-off for that because I've been on my own and because I'm now a practice owner and a business owner, so I can kind of control my own situation. As they grew up, I was able to have a lot more flexibility in my scheduling to spend more time with them than maybe I would have otherwise.

So that's been the positive trade-off. I think just watching how my associate has done it, she was able to stay home longer when they were little but for the most part, her kids don't come to work with her. She had her husband, they do a shared thing. He does a lot of the care for them.

My husband is a board-certified veterinary internist, so he works really long hours as well. So he, you know, he wasn't as much available to help out as hers is. And you know, the kids go to daycare and they have family that comes and help them. And yeah, it's a little easier, it's a little more common, I think.

So there are more resources available to help out.

Kim Brown: Yeah. And the technology today also, like you said, back in our day, in the early days there weren't cell phones and even the early cell phones had such bad service. It wasn't, it was like not having a cell phone so you still had pagers and tried to stop by the payphone at the corner store in the country.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: It's hilarious. I'm writing an article right now for Horse & Rider and that's part of my lead is back in the day, my pager would go off and I'd get out of my truck at the convenience store and haven't seen a payphone, you know, and it was only 10 cents to make a call.

Kim Brown: Yeah. And usually those little corner stores had some nice little food too. I mean, one in Kentucky, you can get fat fried bologna sandwiches and homemade baklava. It was amazing.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Oh my gosh. that's hilarious.

Kim Brown: Yeah, but I think also there's some perks of being out on the road, but it's you said, you know, it's a challenge when you have children, you have daycare. You have today, you know, you've got kids in COVID that are home because so many things are closed. I mean, what is it as a practice owner? And I'm going to say this, there's a lot of practice owners who still are hesitant to want to hire women because young women will want to have families and then they're going to be off all the time. And so how do you address that?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah, I mean, I think that is as a practice owner in general. I mean, there's so many things to be said about that I've learned. So I have a Gen X and a millennial working for me. And I think that whole generational thing is very, it's really interesting. And I am most definitely kind of at the end of the baby boomers. So the, you know, and I find myself having those kinds of thoughts and I know that's a lot out there, and the practice owner mentality still is "I did it, you know, I worked seven days a week. I was on call 365 days a year and walked uphill in the snow barefoot, both ways," you know, that whole by the bootstraps thing. And honestly, I think we have a lot to learn from our younger associates who want to have a better work-life balance.

And when I find myself thinking those kinds of things in the back of my mind, I try to realize that no, they're probably right. It's probably a little healthier not to be that way. And so we try to really adapt our schedule to make work an enjoyable place to be. Our, my associates work four-day weeks we have an emergency share with another practice so they're on primary call one weekend a month. I don't take weekend calls anymore, but they're on primary call one weekend a month and then secondary call a second weekend a month. If one of them starts a little bit later, because she used to, before COVID, liked to go to the gym in the morning and we just sorta try to do what we can to adjust the schedule so people

are happy. And you know, don't begrudge the vacations or the days off, we try to share the holidays so each one of us has one major holiday that we just cover that week. And I think we have to pay attention to making people happy and not so much to making tons of money and, you know, yeah.

Kim Brown: And it's hard to find people who want to come into equine practice today. And part of it is the mentality that you and I grew up with that you are on call seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Right. And somehow that's cool, but you know, it really isn't. I mean, it really isn't that like something to brag about that you never took a day off.

It's like, we probably would all be better off if we did. And so would our clients and so would would our patients, so.

Kim Brown: Let's go back and do a little reminiscing. So you talked about how you were back to work in a week after having your first child, you had a nanny in the truck and the nanny takes the kid off if you know, the baby starts crying. But as they got a little older, I mean, how do you handle the raising of children, the parenting and everything that goes along with that at different ages and stages of the children.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. I mean, honestly, you think when you have a baby that's just so hard. And at one point I had a kindergartner and a newborn. My kids are five years apart, which it was... like, I look back at that now and I honestly don't really know how I did it. That you just kind of do what you have to do. So the babies were both in the truck for the first year. My first daughter then went with the nanny. My second daughter, I did put her in a big kind of daycare preschool sort of thing. I actually think that was a little better, I think, because she had more exposure to kids and you know, half day kindergarten, I would pick one up and take her to where her sister was and, you know, you schedule that into your day.

And that, that period was pretty impossible. Probably the hardest time though, was when there... what you don't realize when you have babies is that they take a lot of time, but you take them with you to do your stuff.

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Dr. Barb Crabbe: When they turn seven, eight, nine, 10, all of a sudden they have their stuff. And so then you have your stuff and you have to take them to do all of their stuff.

And that, I mean, I just drove a million miles and picked people up in between appointments and dropped them off here and there. And I'm really a strong believer... my kids have been

really involved in a lot of things. One of them rode horses pretty seriously. They both did dance. One of them does a ton of theater.

I used to spend a lot of time in coffee shops, writing articles in between, you know, while kids are doing things and doing appointments at weird hours. And you just have to be flexible, I think.

Kim Brown: Yeah. I can imagine an ambulatory vet who also has the mom taxi business. Pretty tough.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. Although on some level, I mean, to be fair, it's easier than if you have a nine to five job where you can't... where you have no flexibility and can't leave the building. I mean, then you really are kind of stuck. You can only do stuff with your kids, you know, at night.

Kim Brown: Yeah.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: So in a way that's a little bit harder.

But of course, being able to juggle things is very dependent on either being your own boss or having a boss who's up for that and can manage that.

Kim Brown: So, and I'm sure some practice owners— I'm going to get back into this just a little bit from what we talked about— there are practice owners who, you know, you talked about having six weeks of maternity leave.

That's pretty great. And not all veterinarians have that. We did a survey at EquiManagement with Dr. Amy Grice and found that a lot of young female practitioners suffered some abuse on wanting to take off for maternity leave. I mean, what is your advice to practice owners first? And then to young women or men who might want to take off if they have a new child. Who want to make sure they have that time off? How do you arrange that in your professional life?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Well, I think the biggest advice... So I have a story that kind of goes along with that. I was sitting at a meeting with my associate. So let, let me say this. I have my two associates. One's worked for me for 17 years and the other one has worked for me for six now. Which is, I think kind of unusual in equine practice. At least in the local practices. The associates that I know in other practices usually don't last longer than a couple of years. The reason I have that I think is because I try to accommodate their needs and certainly being accommodating to having children and taking care of children is part of it. So back to my story, I was sitting at a CE dinner next to an older, very macho, very up by the bootstraps veterinarian with my associates sitting next to me and we were talking about associates and how long we'd have them you know? And he looked at me and he goes, how on earth do you keep an associate for that long? And I said, well, I do this and I do that and I do this. And Dr. Posey, my associate, was listening to this at the same time and sitting there, and he literally looked at me and then sort of turned, went huh, looked away and didn't talk to me again for the whole rest of the night. It was like he just couldn't even hear it. But I think that's, I mean, that's the reality. You have to try to figure out a way to do it. You have to be

creative with scheduling and you can't think that people are going to work constantly with no break and no opportunity to stay home and have a child.

And it's way worth it to have a really good associate and be gone for six weeks and then have some flexibility in their scheduling and have them work for you for 17 years than to trade them out every two years. I mean that, that's, there's no question, even from a business standpoint. I mean, even if you're just looking at the bottom line and you're just looking at profitability and you know, turnover of associates is a huge ding for a practice.

Kim Brown: Right. The onboarding is expensive.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Oh yeah. It's expensive. And it's hard to, I mean, it's really hard to get a new veterinarian accepted by your clients. And if you don't want to be the one working all the time, you have to be willing to share the work.

Kim Brown: Yeah.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. But I guess some people want to work all the time.

Kim Brown: Yeah. Well, you mentioned, you know, we had one client ask you about, you know, do any other clients, not like you having kids? Can you maybe tell us a few stories about some of the problems you've faced when it regards to parenting and being an equine veterinarian?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: I mean, I don't know that I like any specific, I maybe it's too far in my distant past, but I don't remember there being any really huge issues.

I mean, sure, I do remember the, you know, my husband was out of town and I had the middle of the night emergency call and I had to get, you know, a baby out of bed and put them in the truck crying and take them to the appointment. And I've been criticized, I'm sure, by people, you know, that I did that with my kids, but honestly, my kids are great.

Like my 22-year-old just graduated from college and got a really good job in the middle of COVID and is out living with friends in an apartment and is super happy. And my 17-year-old is super independent, doing great in school and we like being around each other. So, you know, people could criticize me sending my employees to the end of the driveway to pick them up from the school bus, which sometimes I had to do, but I think it worked out just fine. Like, I don't feel like they've struggled because of me taking them out of bed at midnight when they were six or four. They survived it and they can talk to adults. They're really good around adults. They had a lot of that kind of socialization. They know how to behave. They can handle horses really well. Actually, I mean, and I do have the benefit, I suppose, of living on the property and having the practice on the property but during one period of my career, I've dropped it a little bit now, but we did a ton of frozen semen breeding, which involved 3:00 AM ovulation checks.

And I didn't feel like it was really safe to do that without someone holding the horse in the stocks. I know some people do that. So, my kids would fight over the, who got to hold the mare at three o'clock cause I paid them off. I paid them each 20 bucks every time they got

up and we would they'd set an alarm, I'd go down and get, and we'd get up at three, come down to the clinic, check a mare, go down and get back to bed and then count up their mares for the year.

And both of them could handle horses pretty well. So I think our record for doing that with my oldest daughter, who's really my horse girl was getting up at three and it took us six minutes to get to the clinic, get the mare palpated and be back at the house. I mean, that was crazy, but yeah, so, you know, those are just the kind of things that we did.

Kim Brown: And is there any advice that you would give for men or women who want to enter equine veterinary practice and who want this balance of career and family? How, as you're thinking about going into this, are you not dissuaded or how do you negotiate or find the right practice in order to have that balance?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah, I think that's what you just said. That's the key. You have to find the right practice and, you know, be up front about it going in and just find a practice that is interested in that work-life balance. And honestly, probably someone who's raised kids while they're in practice and knows it can be done.

And yeah, ask the former associates what it was like working in that practice. I think that's a huge thing.

Kim Brown: And is there anything that if you could go back and wave the magic wand and make some changes just from, you know, hindsight's 20-20, is there anything that you have learned over the years that you might have gone back and told your younger self?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Well, I... Boy, I might've told myself that raising children was the hardest job that you're ever going to have if you think anything else is hard. You know, I don't know that the only thing I wish I could've done differently again, which I've already mentioned, is I wish I could have had that month at home when they were first born.

And I think that's, you know, something that I would try to do now, but again, then it just wasn't, it just wasn't a thing.

Yeah, sometimes

Kim Brown: reality is what it is

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Right. Yeah, I did have a couple of clients that gave me advice when I first got pregnant with my first child that I will never forget.

And one of them, which I still to this... actually the person who told me this, her daughter is now my younger associate. And she said to me, you know, Barb, sometimes you just have to let things go. So, that was very good advice. And the other one that was a client I'd known forever, and she said, you know, Barb, just remember the baby is coming to live with you, which was kind of an interesting thing to think about, you know.

Kim Brown: That is.

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. So those are two things that have stuck with me.

Kim Brown: Well, and you mentioned that you have a millennial and a Gen Xer. What advice would you give to practice owners who really would like to have a quality veterinarian and maybe don't understand what they need to offer and what these next generation veterinarians are looking for?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: Yeah. I mean, I think the first answer to that, that we've already touched on is I think we, we do need to realize that we can learn something from them and our way isn't necessarily the best way. I have found it really interesting just to read about the differences in the generations and, you know, there's a lot out there in the literature and there, you know, you go to CE lectures all the time about working with the different generations.

I find that fascinating. And I find it, I do, I have found it helpful to realize that, you know, sometimes if you think someone is being lazy or someone is, you know, can't do anything by themselves or whatever that you have to look back and see what it is that's driving that kind of thing and try to understand it, I think.

And if you understand it, then it's easier to work with it. And sometimes to realize, huh, you know, maybe that's something I should think about.

Kim Brown: Well, is there anything else that you think that you would like to offer as advice to either up- and- coming veterinarians or practice owners who are managing these younger veterinarians when it comes to parenting and veterinary practice?

Dr. Barb Crabbe: I can't think of anything else that we haven't really touched on. Really just being flexible and being open-minded and realizing that you're going to be a lot better off if you have associates that are happy and employees that are happy and that stay with you for a long time. So doing things to make that happen and to keep them happy is probably some of the best business management you can do.

Kim Brown: Well, we really appreciate you sharing some of your personal life and some of your professional tips with us this morning, Dr. Crabbe.

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