



Solo Practitioners Find Options to Ease On Call Strain: Success Story



Dr. Michael Clark

Part of the beauty of solo ambulatory practice is the ability to shape your business into your unique vision for career success. A tradeoff can be the absence of a team to share after-hours emergencies, but paradigm shifts about this facet of equine practice are easing the strain for solo practitioners.

Like many equine ambulatory practitioners when starting out on their own, Dr. Michael Clark and Dr. Ashley Allemand Davidson would see almost any emergency, regardless of drive time or client status. However, practice growth, life changes and the cumulative toll of 24x7 availability, especially in their rural settings, have led each to refine their after-hours policies.

Dr. Clark established South Sound Equine Practice in Tenino, Wash., in 2017. There are several other equine practitioners on

the fringes of his 45-minute practice radius, and the veterinary teaching hospital at Oregon State University is three hours away.

Meanwhile, Dr. Allemand Davidson launched Faith Veterinary Service in Hammond, La., in 2020, servicing a 75-mile radius in southern Louisiana. The two closest equine practitioners are 45- and 60-minutes away, as is the veterinary teaching hospital at Louisiana State University (LSU).

Client-Only Coverage

“I used to see any emergency—client or not—but now only see client emergencies, which has cut down on the burden a lot,” said Dr. Allemand Davidson. “Occasionally I’ll make an exception to help out a colleague. If I’m unavailable, I usually refer to LSU.”

She responds to after-hours emergency calls right away; other convenience calls from clients are returned the next morning.

For Dr. Clark, consolidating his emergency coverage response only to clients seen within the past 12 months was part of broader boundary setting by the husband and father of a 7-year-old daughter.

All calls to his practice go through voicemail, which he monitors closely while working, and his message explicitly states that he provides services only to current clients. His phone only rings after hours when the caller leaves a message after choosing the emergency option on the phone tree.

Charge Appropriately

Dr. Clark raised his after-hours emergency fee significantly, and it begins promptly at 5:00 p.m., regardless of whether he’s home from work or not.

“I charge a lot, and you know what? Nobody bats an eye,” he said. “It makes after-hours emergencies less painful and more financially rewarding, which is one of the things as veterinarians we need to be more comfortable with. If we don’t make money, we don’t practice.”

When possible, he triages the emergency call—at no charge—to try to stabilize the situation until normal business hours.

Setting Client Boundaries

“Set your boundaries and set them before you are burned out and angry because they work a lot better when you are not in that position,” said Dr. Clark.

As part of his core practice boundaries, Dr. Clark refuses to acquiesce to horse owners who call from outside of his coverage area and don’t have a regular veterinarian nor a trailer or plan for when an emergency strikes.

While he makes it a point to call these owners back because he doesn’t want them not to get a call back, he said it’s important to realize that “sometimes, it’s not my problem. It can be my problem to choose to fix or engage with, but it’s not my problem to worry about. As the profession continues to contract, owners are going to have to have a better idea that we are not always going to show up at their house.”

Dr. Allemand Davidson has started educating her clients about the situations that warrant a true after-hours emergency call and those that can wait until regular practice hours, but she says it’s a work in progress and receives non-emergency messages almost daily.

“My clients have my cell number, which is something I would do differently if I could do it over,” she said, adding that she plans to investigate using an answering service for after-hours calls and perhaps explore forming an emergency cooperative with the other rural practitioners in her region.

Added Dr. Clark, “There’s a benefit to ownership that is not just monetary. Being the owner means I get to pick and choose what I do. Do I sometimes break my own boundaries? Yes, but the decision to do that is in my control.”