

Pet Talk: Veterinary care for Egypt's working animals

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Pet Talk



Egypt Equine Aid's mission is to provide healthcare to the country's working animals, as they generally don't receive it in any capacity.
Special to the Daily

The silence of the pre-dawn hour is broken by the call to prayer — haunting and beautifully melancholy. Donkeys bray and horses softly nicker. Cairo's first light spreads into morning sun. The donkey-drawn cart bumps down the driveway with a load of freshly cut berseem clover for the inpatients at Egypt Equine Aid, a charity clinic near the pyramids for the working horses and donkeys.

The morning's first patient is Bahr, Arabic for sea. He was abandoned in the streets of Cairo after a cart wreck. Road rash took much of the skin from his limbs. The remaining skin on his body is stretched taught across the protruding bones of his skeleton with weeping wounds on his pelvis and knees. Not useful in this condition, he was left for dead. Under the watchful care of EEA, his prognosis is good.

Within the walls of the clinic grounds, the patients have enough to eat, perhaps for the first time in their lives. The touch they receive is kind, in contrast to the harsh whips they knew as working animals.

The next patient is a filly with a gaping and infected wound on her withers. One of the spinous processes is clearly fractured. I sedate her and prepare her for a small surgery. I remove the bone, debride necrotic tissue and cleanse the wound. A group of local veterinarians and assistants watched carefully.

The parade continues all day: abscesses from injections with dirty needles, festering wounds, starvation, laminitis, tetanus — the list continues.

The next patient, a 20-year-old mare, was brought in because she wouldn't work hard enough pulling a heavy cart. Not much more than skin covers her bones. Her neck only turns one way from an old injury. Her limbs are weak, and she is seven months pregnant. There is no magic medication to make her young and strong again, but I have the perfect tools to ease her pain.

This was the first time the veterinarians had seen integrative therapies and physical medicine: chiropractic, acupuncture, soft tissue work and laser therapy. The mare lowered her neck as she began to trust a gentle touch. Her eye, hard and angry, softened and half closed. Her neck slowly released and moved in both directions. She licked her lips, sighed and lowered her heavy head onto my shoulder. The respite may have been temporary, but she had moments of undeniable bliss.

A NEW HORIZON

internship program for veterinarians to gain valuable experience. For some of these young veterinarians, this is the first time they have ever been around horses.

During my stay at EEA, we treated many sick and wounded animals. While that's significant, this old mare was the most special. Easing this gal's pain was rewarding, but her true importance was much bigger and far deeper than that. For the first time, the veterinarians saw an interaction that listened to the horse's subtle communication, emphasized empathy rather than power and honored her as a conscious being rather than a pulling machine.

As the call to prayer sounds after my departure, I hope these young veterinarians have improved wound management and surgical skills. I hope they understand lameness examinations. If, however, they feel empowered to interact with the animals with kindness and respect; if they can spread these soft skills into the world of veterinary medicine in Egypt, my time there will have been worthwhile.

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