



Unwanted Horse - Feb 3rd, 09

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), animal welfare is a human responsibility that encompasses all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, nutrition, disease prevention and treatment, humane handling and, when necessary, humane euthanasia.

Both science and society have a role to play in deciding what constitutes an appropriate level of animal welfare. While science can determine what type of degree of animal welfare risk exists under specific circumstances, it cannot determine what type of degree of risk is acceptable – that is the question that society decides.

Different people emphasize different factors when evaluating the welfare of animals. None of these views is inherently right or wrong. And people may hold more than one view at a time. They may consider:

- The basic health and function of the body (functional view).
- How an animal “feels,” that is, its physiological state, such as pain, suffering or contentment (positive affective states views).
- An animal’s ability to lead a reasonably natural life and perform behaviors in which it might normally engage (natural living view).

When the welfare of horses is assessed, their broad athletic, economic and recreational uses are also considered.

A number of issues that affect the welfare of horses are a focus for many individuals and organizations, including equine veterinarians. The AAEP has developed position statements for the following issues:

- Transportation and Processing of Horses
- Management of Mares Utilized in the PMU Collection Industry
- Use of Horses in Urban Environments
- Use of Vesicants

- Practice of Soring
- Practice of Tail Docking
- Thermocautery or Pin Firing
- Therapeutic Medications in Racehorses
- Therapeutic Medications in Non-Racing Performance Horses
- Stewardship of the Horse

The plight of the unwanted horse also is a growing welfare issue. The Unwanted Horse Coalition, a broad alliance of national equine organizations joined together under the American Horse Council, is concerned that some horses may slip through the various safety nets within the horse industry. The Coalition is working to educate industry groups about this important issue and help people learn to “own responsibly.”

Veterinarians and horse owners have legal and ethical obligations to ensure the welfare of horses. Some states require veterinarians to report animal cruelty. The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may observe cases of animal neglect and abuse as defined by federal or state laws, or local ordinances. When these situations cannot be resolved through education, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities, such as:

- Police Department or County Sheriff
- Animal Control
- Humane Society
- State Department of Agriculture

Horse owners are not required by law to report instances of animal cruelty. However, most states require that an animal’s owner or caregiver provide a minimum level of care. Generally, this care includes food, water, shelter and veterinary care when needed to prevent suffering. Horse owners can promote equine welfare by becoming educated and working proactively to address widespread concerns within the industry and by reporting local horse neglect or abuse to authorities.

There may come a time when, for humane, medical, economic or safety reasons, an owner may need to consider euthanasia for their horse. The decision to euthanize, or induce a

painless death, should never be made without careful consideration. The right choice is clearly the one that is in the best interest of the horse and the people who care for it. A veterinarian can aid clients in making a timely decision, prepare the owner for what will happen and ensure the horse's life is ended as painlessly and distress-free as possible. The following questions may be helpful:

- Is the horse suffering?
- What is the likelihood of recovery or at least an acceptable return to usefulness?
- Has the horse become depressed or despondent or does it continue to show an interest and desire to live?
- How much discomfort or distress can the owner expect the horse to endure?
- What kind of special care will this horse require and can the owner meet its needs?
- Can the owner continue to provide for this horse economically?
- What are the alternatives?

Below are Web sites that offer more detailed information that has been presented here:

www.aaep.org

The AAEP Ethical Guidelines and Position Statements are available here. An additional brochure – *Euthanasia: The Most Difficult Decision* – is available as well as *Care Guidelines for Equine Rescue and Retirement Facilities*.

www.avma.org

The AVMA's animal welfare policies, background information on issues and news articles on welfare can be found here. A brochure – *How Do I Know It Is Time? Equine Euthanasia* – is also available.

www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org

The mission of the Unwanted Horse Coalition is to reduce the number of unwanted horses and to improve their welfare through education and the efforts of organizations committed to the health, safety and responsible care and disposition of these horses.

www.horsecouncil.org

The American Horse Council is the national association representing all segments of the horse industry in Washington, D.C.

Your veterinarian

Police or County Sheriff

Animal Control

Humane Society

State Dept. of Agriculture

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