



CURRENT TOPICS IN Equine Welfare

was very excited to see that the keynote lecture at the 2010 American Association of Equine Practitioners Annual Convention addressed the Unwanted Horse. There were additional lectures discussing equine welfare topics and I would like to take this opportunity to share some of the highlights.

According to Tom Lenz, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACT, the keynote speaker, the unwanted horse is defined as a “horse who is no longer wanted by their current owners because they are old, injured, sick, unmanageable, or simply fail to meet the owners’ expectations.” The number of unwanted horses in the United States has been estimated at 170,000–200,000 animals.

The causes of this large number have been cited as the close of slaughter plants in the U.S., a downturn in the economy, irresponsible horse breeding, animal activist group activity, and a downturn in the low-middle range horse market due to an excess of this type of animal. Seventy percent of equine rescue facilities are also at or near capacity. Consequently, there simply is no place for horses to go.

While there is no single solution for the problem of unwanted horses, a few practical suggestions have been discussed. The first of these for everyday practitioners is responsible horse ownership. Responsible ownership encompasses breeding management and



planning, having a back-up plan should financial complications arise, and carefully examining the horse's purpose and suitability prior to purchase. It is up to the equine community as a whole to take responsibility for these issues. Misrepresenting a horse at sale, breeding specifically for color, or even unreasonable expectations for a new horse, occur frequently and add to the number of unwanted horses.

The issue of horse slaughter in the U.S. always seems to come up when discussing the unwanted horse. While unpleasant and a definite source of controversy, slaughter does present a viable option for dealing with unwanted horses. Before the three U.S. slaughter plants were closed, they were found to be up to current standards, horses were euthanized properly, and stress was kept to a minimum before slaughter. Horses are currently being transported to Mexico and Canada for slaughter. The main concern

with this is how the horses are transported—currently there is a bill supported by the AAEP being proposed that would ban the transport of horses in double decker trailers suited for cattle. These trailers are thought to be inhumane due to their short ceiling height and danger in case of an accident. There is also currently a bill that would ban the processing of horsemeat for human consumption. This bill is opposed by the AAEP, as it offers no viable options for the care of these horses.

On a positive note, the equine community is coming together to address the unwanted horse issue. There is now an Unwanted Horse Coalition, reduced cost castration clinics, euthanasia clinics, and reduced cost vaccine clinics for rescues. Many horse owners are looking to adoption as an option for acquiring new horses, as well as starting hay banks to help owners going through tough times.

There are a few other key equine welfare issues that should also be discussed. The act of soring Tennessee Walking Horses has come under examination. Soring is the practice of injecting an irritating substance into the lower limbs of horses to cause an exaggerated gait. This gait has also been acquired by the use of pressure shoes. Shows and competitions sanctioned by the Tennessee Walking Horse Industry have allowed inspection of horses prior to competition using thermographic and radiographic imaging and/or removal of shoes and pads. Trainers and exhibitors can be suspended permanently if their horses are found to be treated inhumanely.

The racing industry has received its share of controversy and change as well. There have been examinations regarding catastrophic injuries, track conditions, medication use, and providing for retired racehorses. The National Thoroughbred Racing Industry created the NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance to address these concerns. The Jockey Club and Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation have been charged with researching these topics and making recommendations. An additional resource that is being developed would allow for better record keeping and communication between veterinarians, trainers, grooms, and jockeys, leading to

better overall care and horsemanship.

The use of medications at horse shows has recently come under fire. Veterinarians are being challenged to protect the horses they care for and use medications only after careful consideration of each case. According to the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF), forbidden substances are those that might affect the performance of a horse by “acting as a stimulant, depressant, tranquilizer, local anesthetic, or psychotropic, is potentially dangerous to the horse, or interferes with drug detection procedures.” Other medications are considered “restricted” and include certain NSAIDs, dexamethasone, and methocarbamol. Most restricted medications require forms to be filled out prior to the show. The Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) has its own list of prohibited substances. This list includes NSAIDs such as phenylbutazone, flunixin meglumine, and salicylic acid. There is also stress being placed on the existence of a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship. This places the responsibility for medical decisions in the hands of the veterinarian, while trusting the client to follow instructions.

The theme that kept recurring during research for this article involves all of us working together to provide the best care for our equine patients. It is up to us to educate clients, provide resources for rescue groups, attend conferences and summits to educate ourselves, and keep an open mind when dealing with equine welfare topics. Research has shown that our approach to welfare is greatly influenced by our environments and the company we keep. Let us be a strong positive and optimistic influence for our clients and members of our community who look to us for guidance and support.

For more information, please visit the following websites: www.aaep.org, www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org, www.grayson-jockeyclub.org/summitdisplay.asp, and www.TheHorse.com/AAEP2010.

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MVMA Animal Welfare Committee

REFERENCES

- American Association of Equine Practitioners, *Proceedings*, 56th Annual Convention, December 4–8, 2010, Baltimore, MD.
- The Horse*, 2010 AAEP Convention Wrap-Up, March 2011.