Responsible Use of Medication in Performance Horses/Racehorses

Jeff A. Blea, DVM

Regardless of discipline, a moral and ethical high ground must be considered when treating horses in a competitive environment. Knowing the right action is simple, following through on that action can be complicated and convoluted. The subsequent statement from over 3 decades ago remains quite relevant today and serves as a navigational tool when it comes to responsible use of medication in the performance horse or the racehorse. As an exercise, transpose the word veterinarian for organization, and these words will become very personal and compelling. We must take care to maintain a high level of awareness of why we exist as an organization, lest we lose our bearings in the midst of the rapid pace at which things are changing and increasing in complexity. Equine practitioners exist as an organization because of the horse and the medical and surgical needs particular to the species. Further, this consideration serves as a virtually infallible standard against which to consider all American Association of Equine Practitioners policy. If thought through to its ultimate conclusion, whenever a question is answered based upon the welfare of the horse, the human principles involved are also best served in the long run. We are here for the horse; to the extent that we are responsive to that concept, we will prosper both as individuals and as an organization. Presidential Address, James Coffman, 1986. Author’s address: Von Bluecher, Blea & Hunkin, Inc., 282 W Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre, CA, 91024-2312; e-mail: jbleadvm@gmail.com. © 2020 AAEP.

1. Introduction

Medication use in the equine industry is under considerable scrutiny by the general public, and in effect, is threatening the veterinary community’s social operating license. The social license to operate has been defined as existing when an industry has the ongoing approval within the local community and other stakeholders, ongoing approval or broad social acceptance and, most importantly, ongoing acceptance. It is consequently granted by the community, hence, the social license to operate has to be earned and must be maintained. Where is the equine industry now and where does it need to be in the next 5 years relative to medication in the performance horse? Many believe that less is best. However, the question remains: while ensuring the survivability of the industry in which the horse competes, what is best for the horse? Stakeholders, including veterinarians, are recognizing that medication use in performance horses is no longer deemed universally acceptable, despite scientific evidence of benefit. Numerous industry attempts to educate the public on the difference between therapeutic medication versus performance enhancing medication have fallen in vain as permissive use of medication in equine sport is becoming less and less tolerated by society. The need to educate the public
that therapeutic medication is necessary to maintain a healthy athlete is laudable yet it is becoming more difficult to obtain validation from a non-agrarian-based society. This is not a new frontier. However, in the public lens, responsible medication use in equine sport is becoming increasingly important and the equine veterinary community must adapt to a changing world if racing and performance horse sports are to remain viable and relevant.

Rest assured that the sky is not falling when it pertains to use of medication in performance horses. That said, equine veterinarians are a trusted resource, must remain so, and must be tolerant and accepting to public interest and concerns pertaining to medication in the competitive equine athlete. The focus of this presentation will be directed primarily to the racing industry and its stakeholders, whose utmost priority needs to be the safety and welfare of the horse. However, many of the same principles and concepts presented here can be applied to the majority of disciplines in the performance horse industry as well.

2. Discussion

Medication issues in equine sport have been at the forefront of veterinary medicine for many years. In fact, medication issues in racing have been a provocative issue since the inception of the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP). A headline in the *Los Angeles Times* read, “Cops Ride with Vets” depicting the poor image of the racetrack practitioner, thus serving as the primary impetus of the founding members of the AAEP. For the past 60 years, medication use in racing has been a recurrent topic of conversation and debate with the results sometimes coming full circle. For example, in 1965, the medication rule, which prohibited the use of specific medications 48 hours prior to a race, was abolished in California. Interestingly enough, in 2019 due to political pressure from animal rights activists, in conjunction with a media crisis surrounding fatalities at Santa Anita, a 48-hour medication rule was reinstated in California.

Throughout the years, and in large part due to the service of many equine practitioners, model rules and standards of practice were developed for competitive equine sports, specifically horse racing. The 1960 AAEP Guidelines contained the Policies Pertaining to Medication of Race Horses, essentially becoming the rules of racing at that time pertaining to medication. In 1963, the premise of medication uniformity and responsible use of medication had already been born. According to Dr. Jack Robbins, “If rules pertaining to medication could be more clearly defined and standardized, the practice of ethical veterinary medicine would be greatly simplified and facilitated.” Today, racing industry struggles with the same issues as uniformity of 38 racing jurisdictions adopting different sections of the National Uniform Medication Program (NUMP) has been challenging. NUMP, developed through the work of the Racing Medication and Testing Consortium, is designed to provide unprecedented reform for horse racing in the areas of uniform medication rules, penalties, and testing guidelines. Much progress has been made, but because of differing issues among states, more work needs to be done to achieve medication uniformity in racing.

The horse show industry has not been exempt from the perception of illicit drug use in medication. As such, the first American Horse Show Association (AHSA) Drug and Medication Rules committee was formed in 1971 to address illicit drug use with medication. Over the years, governing bodies such as Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) and United State Equestrian Federation (USEF) have diligently attempted to provide medication guidelines that are responsible and in the best interest of the horse. They have for the most part been successful in establishing regulations in performance, while protecting the horse, and ensuring the integrity of fair competition. However, due to the shortcoming of inappropriate human competitiveness and the desire to prevail and gain monetarily, these organizations must remain steadfast in their regulatory efforts to maintain stakeholder confidence.

In racing, the Racing Medication and Testing Consortium, established by the AAEP in 2001, has been the most impactful and relevant organization relative to rules and regulations in the last several years. They have developed science-based industry standards pertaining to medication withdrawal times and laboratory standards. They serve as a resource to industry stakeholders, specifically veterinarians and horsemen, when applying rules of racing in a practical manner. The organization continues to be the most germane and progressive organization in racing as far as rules, regulation, and policy are concerned. Rules and regulation in sport are mandatory, and with the current sophisticated level of testing, they must remain practical and fluid. The management of the aforementioned aspects of fair competition in racing is dependent upon veterinary practitioners and organizations such as the AAEP.

Groups such as Racing Medication and Testing Consortium, which are veterinary-centric, provide resources from veterinarians whereby the horse is the central focus. Veterinarians are regarded as the most trustworthy stewards regarding equine safety according to a 2019 survey. Racetrack and performance horse veterinarians must engage professionally and politically to defend the horse. But equally important, is the need to continually manage the veterinary profession in performance horses, thus providing a means for social license to operate as a professional entity within the realm of competitive equine sports. The social license to operate is constantly evolving and based on public trust. If that trust is lost, veterinarians could potentially lose the ability to maintain leadership in the equine industry.
Social license to operate is a subjective concept, often used in the corporate world, and is essentially based on an industry's stakeholders, what they think of equine veterinarians, in addition to public perception of what veterinarians do. It is critically imperative to maintain a significantly impactful social operating license in the racing industry if veterinarians are to be at the stakeholder table to affect change. Veterinarians need to be involved in medication issues relative to the performance/racing industry. However, it is paramount to demonstrate a meaningful presence based on actions, thereby strengthening a position as advocates of the horse. In doing so, a social operating license becomes validated and significant within the industry.

This is accomplished by establishing a professional, ethical, and moral level of commitment to the welfare of the horse and the integrity of an entire industry. The legitimacy of equine practitioners in the racing or performance industry facilitates their credibility given by stakeholders and eventually evolves into public trust. Public trust is necessary for the racing industry and the performance industry to survive. In order to provide that trust and maintain a social license to operate as veterinary practitioners, practitioners must remain ethical and responsible in the use of medication, and at all costs, put the welfare of the horse first; above financial gain, recognition, and infamy.

Additionally, continual assessment of a social operating license as a veterinary profession must occur to ensure relevance to the horse and the industry that is served. It is a dynamic process, and as such, continual evaluation and measurement is needed to allow for change, acceptance, approval, and provide metrics of co-ownership of the veterinary social license to operate in the racing and performance industry.

So begs the question, how does the veterinary profession obtain and maintain social license to operate? Over the years, veterinarians have been regarded as a trusted resource. How do practitioners maintain that and continually develop that trust and acceptance from the public and stakeholders?

The solution is relatively simple; however, it requires change and continual evolution in a world that is (was) constant and familiar. Racing, whether one recognizes it or not, will need a paradigm transformation in order to survive. Equine competition in general needs a cultural change if it is going to continue to exist and thrive. Most within the industry are reluctant to accept this. However, how is horse racing destined to exist, much less survive, in a world where horses die? Horse racing, a multi-billion-dollar industry, cannot survive in its current format.

Change needs to occur, and in an industry whereby change is hard, it needs to occur post haste to prevent a perilous outcome. Leadership, spurred by the veterinary community, must lead this charge based on science and fact, devoid of emotion where possible.

3. Conclusion

The equine veterinary profession can affect change, in essence a cultural change, in equine sport and establish responsible use of medication in racing/performance horse disciplines. As such, as a profession and an organization of equine practitioners, racetrack and performance horse veterinarians have a proven track record since 1954 of doing so. In order to facilitate the industry to survive and thrive, several important areas of interest need to be addressed and managed professionally by the veterinary community. They include, but are not limited to the following:

1. Ethics—As a profession, adherence to the professional conducts of ethical principles established by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the AAEP® is critical.
2. Integrity—Represent the profession and the industry with honesty and character.
3. Transparency—Maintaining and providing complete medical records detailing responsible treatment is in the best interest of the horse.
4. Accountability—Veterinarians must be accountable for their actions and must defend the reasoning for their actions.
5. Uniformity—Operating in a united manner is necessary for the sustainability of the industry.
6. Compassion—Review the veterinarian’s oath that was sworn upon graduation and never lose focus on why veterinarians chose this profession in the first place.
7. Morals—This defines, in conjunction with ethical principles, the basis of the equine practitioner’s social license to operate within the industry.
8. Trust—Validate by actions the role of the veterinarian as the steward for the horse.

As a profession, equine practitioners must prescribe, administer, and treat based upon an accurate diagnosis, with a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) in order to do what is best for the horse. As veterinarians, it is imperative that actions and treatments are based on what is best for the horse. The sustainability of the industry is secured in that the welfare and safety of the horse is the guiding principle, and the profession must never abandon that principle. History has revealed that responsible medication use in competition by veterinarians, whether it be in performance horse disciplines or racing, has been a contentious and advancing issue in the public lens.

With the issues that occurred in racing in California in 2019, the industry stakeholders, including the veterinary community, are recognizing the need for
urgent change to secure the sustainability of the racing industry in particular.

Change is often hard, but with change comes growth. Racing, the performance horse industry, and the equine veterinarian are in the midst of the greatest change, and perhaps the most profound growth that will ever be experienced in the equine industry. It will require the commitment and dedication of all industry stakeholders in order to be successful. At the end of the day, the beneficiary of this change and growth will be the horse. And isn’t that what it’s all about!

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Ethics
The Author has adhered to the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the AVMA.

Conflict of Interest
The Author has no conflict of interest; however, he is on the Board of Directors of the Racing Medication and Testing Consortium.

References and Footnotes