Ethics: Equine sports medicine fraught with ethical dilemmas

By David W. Ramey, DVM

Highlights:

Practitioners often must balance short-term success versus long-term health of the horse.

Informed consent should be obtained from all parties prior to treatment.

Questionable conduct can create significant legal liability.

Veterinarians who work with competition horses face unique ethical challenges. In human medicine, where issues concerning ethics and competitive sports have been regularly discussed, there is no universally accepted code of ethics; however, some organizations have adopted ethical codes. For example, the International Federation of Sports Medicine declares, “It is the responsibility of the sports medicine physician to determine whether the injured athletes should continue training or participating in competition.” In the heat of competition, with money, reputations and prizes at stake, an equine veterinarian can be placed in a difficult spot.

Conflict of interest

The equine veterinarian’s primary duty is to the horse; however, the goals of taking care of the horse’s health and having it compete may sometimes be at odds. Conflicts of interest arise when the horse’s ability to compete and its health may not be promoted by the same intervention (if it is promoted at all). Employed by the owner, trainer or rider (OTR), the professional success of the sports medicine veterinarian may rely on keeping the horse in competition, which may also mean advocating for short-term success at the risk of long-term detriment. Desires to optimize performance may be balanced against concerns about whether a horse can compete safely. Attempting to enhance a horse’s ability to perform in the short-term may not be in the horse’s best interest in the long term. These conflicts may influence the veterinarian’s actions, for which the veterinarian ultimately can be held accountable.

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the capacity of an individual to make rational, uncoerced decisions. Autonomous decisions are free from controlling interferences, made with reliable information. The competitiveness of equine sport and the expectations put on equine athletes may increase the probability of bad decision-making. Desire for fame and/or reward also weighs on decisions. A horse’s long-term health should never be ignored in the interest of helping to keep it competing.

Informed consent

Informed consent means an adequate level of relevant information is available to allow a free and autonomous choice. It also assumes that the OTR has the expertise to balance the pros and cons of their choices. In order to act ethically, as well as to protect against aggrieved hindsight, veterinarians should obtain appropriate informed consent from all parties before treatment. Veterinarians should involve all parties in decision-making, establish goals of care and, importantly, document the process. Even so, important questions remain. For example, should the veterinarian transfer risk assessment from the OTR, and what are the potential repercussions if that transfer is done?

Return to competition

After an injury, the veterinarian may also be involved in decisions on whether the horse continues to compete and when it can return to competition. In most cases, all parties want to return the horse to competition as soon as possible. The burden of responsibility on the veterinarian in such cases is considerable because of the possibility of bad outcomes.

External factors can influence the decision of what’s best for the horse. The veterinarian may be the only person whose primary concern is both the horse’s short- and long-term health. Consider a show horse with a mild suspensory ligament strain. Rest may be the best option for the horse, with a lower risk of increased injury; however, rest might mean the horse misses an important show. The horse may gain value if it wins, or the rider may gain points toward a year-end award. What happens if the veterinarian decides for the horse?

The OTR can make it difficult for a veterinarian to safeguard a horse’s welfare. Horse health care decisions are not always the veterinarian’s decision to make, and the

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A veterinarian may be faced with the choice of either accepting the OTR’s decision(s) or walking away. Awareness of these conflicts is the first step to acting ethically.

Advertising and sponsorship
Advertising and sponsorship are ubiquitous in equestrian events. Ethically, advertising should always be truthful and not make false or misleading claims; however, advertisers may fail to provide information about the risks of treatment or the fact that a product has not been shown to be effective. Even the sobriquet of “sports medicine veterinarian” has ethical implications if it is used for public relations.

Research in progress and the lack of evidence-based medicine
Many unanswered questions hinder informed decision-making. How can fully informed consent be obtained given the high degree of uncertainty for some sports medicine therapies? Should veterinarians err on the side of using treatments of proven effectiveness, or should decisions be based on the latest medical promise? The rapid technological evolution of sports medicine and the small sample of horses available for research collectively contribute to a lack of evidence-based medicine. Long-term follow-up is also needed to test treatments for efficacy.

Ethically, the level of evidence for a therapy must be communicated to the OTR. Furthermore, conflicts of interest can arise when the veterinarian owns (and has to pay for) the product or service that is being recommended. Ethical veterinarians should operate according to their best assessment of the current data, taking into account the relative risks and benefits of different strategies and the evidence for them. Outside influences should not affect health care decisions made for the horse.

Drugs and performance enhancement: Risks and regulations
Rules regarding the use of performance-enhancing drugs are rather explicitly stated by some equestrian sport organizations but are conspicuously absent in others. It’s unethical to use a prohibited substance; however, just because a prohibited substance is not used does not also mean that using any other substance is ethically appropriate. Efforts to keep drug use in performance horses are undermined when a substance is used because, “It doesn’t test.” The veterinarian should not use any drug that is likely to adversely affect the horse’s health.

Conclusions
Many ethical issues permeate equine sports medicine. Ethics and law are also closely related, and there is potential for significant legal liability in cases involving valuable horses when ethical conduct can be called into question.

Decisions made in a competitive environment can mean the difference between a horse with a long, successful career or a short one, perhaps even one requiring euthanasia. A better understanding of what drives the decisions made by owners, trainers and riders is critical, as are educational efforts to help everyone better understand the long-term consequences of the decisions made on behalf of competition horses.

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