

Ethics: Navigating conflicts of interest and competing interests

By David W. Ramey, DVM

Some of the more difficult and contentious ethical seas to navigate in equine practice involve the various conflicts of interest and competing interests that equine practitioners regularly encounter. For example, the ethical charge “put the horse first” may sometimes come into conflict with an owner or trainer’s desire to win a championship or race. In such cases, the ethical concerns on the part of the veterinarian about the potential for increased chance of injury for horse and rider may not be shared by other parties.



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The underlying basis for such conflicts is usually self-interest; that is, whether a person acts in a way that is personally beneficial above all other considerations. A dominant view in psychology and in much of Western thought is that human beings *always* act from self-interest. However that is true, then it becomes difficult to even discuss ethics because ethics assumes that everyone else’s interests must be taken into account. Fundamentally, attempts to eliminate or reduce the influence of self-interest are the distinguishing feature of a true profession that sets it apart from other occupations.¹ Indeed, professions that are perceived as highly ethical and acting mostly in the interest of others, such as nursing, medicine, or teaching, routinely rate high in surveys of professional esteem; professions with a low perception of their ethical conduct that are perceived as being in it for themselves, such as politicians, car salespeople, or attorneys, routinely are rated unfavorably in such surveys.²

Most conflicts arise between what is in the self-interest of the veterinarian, what is best for the horse or what is in the self-interest of other parties in the veterinarian-client-patient relationship. Whatever else veterinary medicine may be, it is also a business by which veterinarians support themselves and their families. One cannot practice veterinary medicine if one cannot also make a living doing it. Arrangements in equine practice commonly have the potential to put the veterinarian’s primary ethical interest in promoting the best interests of the horse at odds with his or her own financial self-interest. A single-minded interest in the bottom line—the financial measure by which a business is generally deemed successful—runs the risk of the veterinarian’s financial needs or desires being put above obligations to the horse, the horse owner or society.

However, business success is not—or at least should not be—the sole arbiter of success in a veterinary practice.

Financial success is no more the purpose of a veterinary business than getting enough to eat is the purpose of life. While eating is necessary to live, one might hope that the living itself presents greater challenges, opportunities and rewards beyond simply finding enough to eat; furthermore, eating to excess simply isn’t healthy.

In some instances, potential conflicts of interest are almost inherent in veterinary practice. For example, unlike physicians, most veterinarians dispense medications to their clients on behalf of

the horse. While the potential for a conflict of interest in such circumstances certainly exists, it is not necessarily unethical as long as one keeps the needs of the horse foremost. The American Medical Association Code of Ethics notes that “Physicians may dispense drugs within their office practices provided such dispensing primarily benefits the patients.”³

The fact is that there are times when acting ethically may carry a cost. While doing the right thing and acting fairly and ethically is at the foundation of building a professional reputation, there are also times when telling the truth or refusing to perform a procedure may result in the loss of the client and may not be in a veterinarian’s immediate financial self-interest. If it were easy to be ethical, there would be no need for discussions on ethics. Ultimately, however, ethical conduct helps provide the clearest path to resolving the various conflicts and competing interests in equine practice. While acting ethically may not always be in the best interest of the bottom line, it is always in the best interest of the veterinary professional, the reputation of the individual and the veterinary profession as a whole.

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References

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- ³ American Medical Association Code of Ethics, Opinion 8.06.3 <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/physician-resources/medical-ethics/code-medical-ethics/opinion806.page?> Accessed 9 November, 2014