Ethics: The veterinarian’s role in referral of equine cases
By Karen Nyrop, DVM, MS

When equine cases are referred, all parties—veterinarians, clients and horses—should ideally be satisfied with the outcome. This can best be accomplished when all veterinarians involved exhibit professional behavior and act courteously to each other, the client and the horse. This article will discuss responsible referral of cases. The Ethics column in the June issue of EVE will discuss the veterinarian’s role and responsibility in receiving the referral.

It is useful to quickly define the “players” in this referral scenario. The attending, or primary veterinarian, is a client-chosen veterinarian who has undertaken care of the horse by performing one or more examinations, making a diagnosis (if possible) and initiating treatment. The attending or primary veterinarian also becomes the referring veterinarian. The receiving veterinarian, or the referral veterinarian, receives the case for a specific reason from the referring veterinarian. A specialist is specifically defined as a veterinarian who is recognized by the AVMA as a member of a specialty organization. The owner is the person or group of persons who legally own the horse. The client may be the owner or an agent who has been authorized by the owner to make decisions on behalf of the owner and the horse.1,2

When to refer
When might a primary veterinarian consider a referral? The obvious example is for emergency services or for surgery that the primary veterinarian cannot provide. Referrals also can be made for specialized procedures that are beyond the scope of expertise of the primary veterinarian, such as those that require advanced diagnostic equipment, dentistry or elective surgeries. Referrals are usually made for care that may be necessary to provide the best chance at a positive outcome for the horse. Examples would include referral to 24-hour care or use of isolation facilities. The client may also request a referral for a difficult case. The primary veterinarian has an ethical responsibility to inform the client/owner that when required for the best interests and welfare of the horse, there are additional services available. Clients are not obliged to accept a referral, but if the client/owner is informed and declines, the primary veterinarian should continue primary care for the case and keep records indicating that the referral was offered and declined.

Knowledge of what referral services and facilities are located in the area and what they may provide in the way of adjunctive care is important. It is also useful to have some idea of what the referral veterinarian’s expected costs will be prior to referral. Some referral hospitals may provide estimate sheets, but if information about costs is not readily available the referring veterinarian should inquire on the client’s behalf. This allows the client to help make informed decisions regarding the healthcare costs for the horse when deciding to refer a case. The referring veterinarian should also be clear about the client’s wishes and expectations so that these can be communicated with the referral veterinarian.

Communication between parties
The referring veterinarian should speak directly with the referral veterinarian prior to sending the patient. Information that should be given to the referral veterinarian should include the name, address and phone number of the referring veterinarian and client/owner, a brief history of the reason for referral and insurance company contacts, when applicable. This ensures that timely communication can be made to all involved. Additional information provided should include complete patient records, including signalment, history, examinations and diagnostic procedures performed, as well as the results of these examinations. Information as to treatments given and treatments that are ongoing should be documented, including dosages, administration routes and times to be given.

The referring veterinarian and the referral veterinarian should be clear about and agree upon their expectations for regular and complete follow-up status reports to the primary veterinarian and the client/owner, as well as communication with the insurance company. The frequency of contact and the mode of contact should be clear to all involved. Prompt contact, especially if the status of the patient changes, is extremely important. For referring veterinarians, nothing is worse than learning from the client that the horse was euthanized at the referral hospital!

Referral veterinarians should take care not to engage the client/owner in other veterinary care outside the parameters of the original referral case. If additional work is being considered, the primary veterinarian should always be consulted first to see if that work can be performed by the referring veterinarian.

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Upon discharge from the referral veterinarian, all discharge instructions, copies of pertinent records and recommendations for further care of the horse should be received by the primary veterinarian.

All communications between the referring and referral veterinarians, as well as to the client/owner and the insurance company, should be accomplished in a respectful and professional manner.

Fundamentally, ethical conduct in referral situations boils down to good, open communication and respect for our colleagues. While this can be difficult at times, trying hard to make referral situations work smoothly and in the best interest of our clients and their horses helps earn the respect our profession deserves.

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References: