AAEPNEWS

Ethics: Just because you can does not always mean you should

By Faith E. Hughes, DVM, DACVS

Highlights:

Advanced procedures require advanced training and practice for competence.

Training should be factored into the cost when purchasing new technology.

Practitioners must know when to refer due to lack of expertise.

Our profession is a diverse group in some ways. We choose different ways to spend our spare time, and we have some very differing definitions of work-life balance. However, in many ways, we are all similar. We live to learn and continue to improve our ability to practice, we value our patients and our clients and will do whatever we can to help them, and most of us like new shiny toys. The medicine we practice continues to advance at an exponential rate, often due to technologic innovation.

The reality is that, at times, we can obtain the tools to do more than we have the competence to do. In the beginning of my career, any horse that needed stifle radiographs was sent in to the hospital because the radiography equipment available at the time was incapable of taking quality stifle radiographs. Today, it would be unheard of for those horses to be referred to a hospital for radiographs because the portable radiology equipment we have at our disposal is amazing. This is a positive thing for the horse, the vet and the client.

Our ability to diagnose and treat horses has advanced in all arenas, and none of us are exempt from the necessity of continued advanced training.

That same equipment can take high-quality skull radiographs too, but not all veterinarians are trained to know how to take and interpret proper skull radiographs. This does not serve the horse or the client diagnostically or financially. They often still end up coming in to the hospital, but not because the equipment was inadequate. The same story could be told for ultrasound exams of the stifle, ultrasound-guided sacroiliac and vertebral facet injections, radiography of the cervical spine, and field colic surgery, to list a few. Sometimes it is as simple as being a reproductive veterinarian who is asked to perform a lameness/prepurchase exam on an upper-level dressage horse.

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As with any other skill, advanced procedures require advanced training followed by practice to gain experience. Without the training, it is unlikely that techniques are being performed with competence, and also unlikely that the client will be able to make that determination. Advanced training doesn't necessarily mean doing a residency, although a residency with culmination of an examination process and board certification frequently results in competence in advanced procedures and all the things that can go wrong with them.

There are multiple continuing education opportunities available in almost all advanced procedures. These are usually short courses, and they are expensive. How much is it worth for someone to help teach you in two to three days what it took them years or a lifetime to learn? Sometimes it is easier to think about the cost of these opportunities as part of the cost of purchasing and maximizing the use of our new shiny toys.

It seemed with the Great Recession that there was an uptick in the pressure from clients to perform more procedures on the farm. At the same time, there were many veterinarians who had more time to spend with each client to do those procedures. It is the responsibility of the care provider to know when to refer due to lack of expertise. It is damaging to the reputation of our profession and to the health of our patients for that decision to be made too late or not at all.

This is not to say that I wish we still did all stifle radiographs in the hospital. If we did, we would not have time to do MRIs, CTs, and bone scans, which to date are not portable. Our ability to diagnose and treat horses has advanced in all arenas, and none of us are exempt from the necessity of continued advanced training. As long as communication remains a priority between referring and referral veterinarians, the patient is being managed by a team, and the client is being best served.

There are many situations in life where knowing your limits is important, and veterinary practice is no exception.

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