The Case for the Use of Acepromazine in Male Horses

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Acepromazine is known to cause penile prolapse in male horses, although the mechanism is unknown. The incidence of the problem is also not known and seems to be infrequent. Although temporary or permanent paralysis can be devastating, the benefits of the drug’s use must be weighed against possible adverse effects. Acepromazine is probably the longest-acting tranquilizer available (excluding the extremely long-acting tranquilizers such as reserpine and fluphenazine), making it very useful for shipping horses by plane or long distances. Additionally, there is less loss of balance with acepromazine (as is seen with the $\alpha-2$ agonist–induced ataxia), making it useful for clipping, shoeing, and other routine management procedures. Acepromazine may be a better choice for sedation than the $\alpha-2$ agonists for diagnostic and treatment procedures such as echocardiography, bone scans, and treatment of esophageal obstructions. Although it may produce a decrease in gastrointestinal (GI) motility comparable to xylazine, it produces less GI stasis than detomidine or romifidine and may be useful for the treatment of laminitis and myopathy.

Acepromazine has also been associated with a protective effect against anesthetic-associated mortality and has been used as an adjunct to other drugs, for both standing anesthesia and general anesthesia. When used as a premedicant to general anesthesia, acepromazine may have a protective effect against hypoxemia associated with ventilation-perfusion mismatching.

Although this author cannot deny that acepromazine can have adverse consequences, the adverse effects seem to be dose dependent. Potential advantages of its use may outweigh the small likelihood of adverse effects in most male horses. As with any drug used, owners must be warned about the consequences of any procedure, and the dose of acepromazine administered should be kept to a minimum. The veterinarian should be aware of possible adverse effects so that prompt treatment can be instituted if these effects occur. This is the same as the conclusion drawn after a meeting of the Association of Veterinary Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland in which the use of acepromazine in male horses was discussed. As reported in a letter to The Veterinary Record in 1979, Dr. Ron Jones reports that “despite the possible side-effects of acepromazine on the equine penis, the drug remains a most useful sedative in the horse.” A large survey of acepromazine use and incidence of this side effect would be helpful in determining risk.
References