

The effect of ethics on your daily life in and away from practice

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At its simplest, ethics is a system of moral principles. They affect how people make decisions and lead their lives. Perhaps no single word will impact equine practitioners' quality of life more than ethics. We do not make decisions in any aspect of our lives in a vacuum, and the core of who we are and how we choose to live our lives will be formed by the integrity

and mindfulness placed in developing our moral principles.

Ethics and professional conduct behaviors cross all stages of equine practice. Veterinary students are influenced by the knowledge and education demonstrated by the teaching colleges; young veterinarians are influenced by both the clientele and colleagues they work with as well as the mentorship they receive during their formative years; and experienced practitioners may be influenced by their decisions related to personal choice and retired veterinarians by their past decisions.

In the U.S., qualified veterinarians are required to adhere to the American Veterinary Medical Association's Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics (avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/principles-veterinary-medical-ethics-avma). These principles ring true at first glance but, on more critical consideration, there are some inherent conflicts with practice reality. Diagnostic and treatment options are constantly evolving with new technology, inevitably at a higher cost. Too often, younger practitioners are unfamiliar with less expensive options as their training has taken place in a specialty environment with cases that have been referred for advanced care, thus spectrum of care is worthy of discussion.

Both of these subjects are critical to shaping one's personal and professional ethical decisions. Mentorship is transformational early; later in one's practice career, lifetime learning and curiosity traits will sustain the quality and relevance of those ethical decisions to produce a life well lived.

Just as there is rarely "black and white" and most often "two sides to a story," there is a spectrum of care that can be difficult to grasp if there is limited exposure to either end. The Ohio State University has embarked on a

deliberate education of this range via their Preparing for Excellence in Veterinary General Practice program that "aims to address the growing problem of affordability of veterinary care by providing a continuum of acceptable care that considers available evidence-based medicine while remaining responsive to client expectations and financial limitations thereby successfully serving an economically diverse clientele."¹

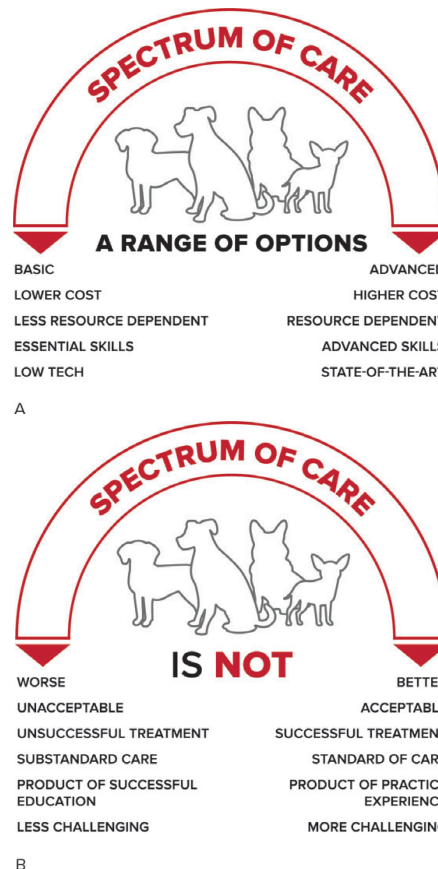


Fig. 1—Illustration of the spectrum of care concept. Spectrum of care involves providing a range of diagnostic and treatment options (top) and should not be viewed in a binary manner (bottom).²

What about those cases that may respond to basic, lower-cost treatments that are low tech and utilize core veterinary skills but for which the owners are unable to access any financial resources due to tragic circumstances or poor planning? In 2020, The Foundation for the Horse and the AAEP partnered with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to manage a program offering relief to horse owners unable

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to afford veterinary care. The Vet Direct Safety Net program (aaep.org/horse-owners/vet-direct-safety-net) provides up to \$600 to AAEP members in the U.S. for common equine emergencies such as medical colic (treated on farm), lacerations, chokes, and euthanasia. Providing an affordable treatment option alleviates the mental and ethical anxiety often faced by both owner and veterinarian in equine emergencies and may partially pave the way to solve the challenges of emergency care for non-client patients.

We all have a role to play in ethics and professional conduct to uphold the quality of the equine practice environment. Equally important, however, we owe it to

ourselves and our families to understand ethical principles and apply those to our practice lives with the expectation of continued mental and fiscal health.

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us.”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

References:

¹ JAVMA 2021 259 463 Figure 2 p 464 - Finland - Preparing veterinary students for excellence in general practice building confidence and competence by focusing on spectrum of care

² JAVMA 2021 259 463 Figure 2 p 465 - Finland - Preparing veterinary students for excellence in general practice building confidence and competence by focusing on spectrum of care