

# AAEP NEWS

## Ethics: Ethical considerations for racetrack practitioners

By Melissa McKee, DVM

Practicing veterinary medicine on racehorses gives us an opportunity to play an exciting and rewarding role in the daily care of these athletes. It is thrilling to see a youngster develop from the yearling sales into a successful and thriving racehorse, and the challenge of maintaining the health and soundness of these individuals throughout their careers allows us to explore and develop our skills as practitioners.



*Dr. Melissa McKee*

In addition to medical matters, racetrack practice carries additional challenges due to the business model of the racing industry; a triangular relationship between the veterinarian, trainer, and (often absentee) owner; and compliance with the swiftly evolving regulations and medication rules. How does one ethically conduct the practice and business of veterinary medicine within this unique microcosm of the equine industry?

I believe the answer lies at the outset of a veterinarian's career. The positive influence of high-quality mentorship for new practitioners cannot be overstated. During these formative years, we develop our clinical skills, sense of professionalism, communication abilities and our ethical "line in the sand." When a young practitioner aligns him- or herself with a high-quality practice, these values become an easy habit to maintain.

While some racehorses are owned and trained by the same individual, racetrack veterinarians typically deal directly with the trainer on healthcare decisions, and the owner is an absent third party with remote involvement in the process. If an owner is not kept in the loop on the status of their horses, the potential to unpleasantly surprise them with medical problems and expenses is high. This can lead to dissatisfaction with racing as a hobby or business enterprise, and cause an exit from the industry. If racing is to survive, we need to attract and retain owners. As veterinarians, we can maintain communication, transparency and trust by involving—or at least notifying—owners about medical decisions made on behalf of their horses. Even a few notes inserted in the invoice can go a long way toward making the owner

informed and reassured that their horses are receiving the best care and advocacy.

Racing for many is a business model, and the pressure to get a horse to the race and in the money is intense. While it is our role to ensure these athletes enter the start box in peak, primed condition, we are sometimes asked to perform treatments or administer medications to enhance performance beyond the medical regulations, or keep a horse racing that would benefit from some time off for lameness or medical problems. Those making the request often infer that if you do not perform said procedure, Dr. X in the next shedrow would be happy to do it. The threat of lost income and lost clients is a powerful incentive in a competitive industry with tight margins, and there is no easy answer to this dilemma. There may be someone in the next barn willing to do something that crosses the line, but it does not have to be you.

Ultimately, unethical behavior by veterinarians and trainers will continue to degrade public perception of the sport until there is no industry left for any of us to enjoy and earn our livelihood from. If we all try to do the right thing whenever possible, we are playing our part in turning the tide of negative publicity.

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Everybody has their ethical "do not cross" line and feels comfortable working within that boundary. The key is to align your moral compass with the best interests of the horse, and maintain the lines of communication and transparency with all stakeholders. Ethical racetrack practice is possible but it occasionally requires courage and sacrifice to maintain those standards. We should be proud of our role as caregiver and protector of the horse and strive to exemplify those values in our daily practice.

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