

# AAEP NEWS

## Ethics: Welcome to the neighborhood...or not

By Melissa McKee, DVM



### ETHICAL PRACTICE Every Day-Every Time

#### Highlights:

A collegial rather than adversarial relationship with a new arrival is more productive for everyone.

Investigate leveraging the new arrival's strengths into a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Maintaining long-held standards of professionalism and respect fosters a healthy practice community.

The reality of modern equine practice is challenging and, at times, can seem bleak. More veterinarians and non-veterinary care providers than ever are working on fewer horses, and the competition for a client's healthcare budget can be intense. The arrival of a new practitioner in the area is likely at some point and can threaten our sense of security and bottom line. While we have no control over these events, we can manage our response and reframe these threats into opportunities.

I practice in an area with a high density of performance, race and pleasure horses so, inevitably, there are other veterinarians coming and going in response to the fortunes of each industry. Over the years while building our practice, many established practices added new associates and other individuals started up on their own. I am fortunate that most equine veterinarians in our area enjoy a collegial relationship, and our mentors have fostered the importance of this within the professional community.

#### Importance of practice standards

When I hear of a new arrival to our area, my first thought is, "I hope they are an ethical vet with a high standard of practice." This may seem counterintuitive so let me explain. Imagine you are a vet with a strong lameness background and good imaging equipment arriving in an area that has no similar practitioners in place. Even though you have unique and probably much-needed skills, the clients have no awareness of what constitutes good lameness diagnostics and treatments. They generally expect a stall-side diagnosis and the standard recommendation of bute and time off, without a thorough examination, and possible blocking, imaging and treatment options. If your services are more complete, they are likely to appear more expensive, but the clients may not be able to differentiate between good care and bad because they have never been educated about the difference. So you spend years painfully trying to elevate the standard of care, one client at a time, having to invest much time and effort demon-



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strating the value of your services and "you get what you pay for."

Now imagine you instead move into an area that already has several veterinarians providing excellent care, with good diagnostic equipment and a high medical standard. How much easier is it to practice in a similar manner when the clients expect all veterinarians to provide this level of skill and service?

#### Better care yields health, financial benefits

In general, if we elevate the standard and delivery of care, clients will start to understand the difference and come to expect it. They also will realize that this higher standard, with better outcomes and more involvement in the well-being of their horses, comes at a higher cost and generally will accept that as part of the package. For those who initially question the price, you can demonstrate that early and accurate diagnosis is actually more economical because less time and money is wasted pursuing the wrong assumption and management. They realize that "Dr. X" is less expensive because he cuts corners, or doesn't stay up to date, or isn't available for emergencies. Some clients may not care and simply want the cheapest vet around, but is that who you wanted to be when you graduated from veterinary school? Price wars are a race to the bottom and a losing proposition for all competitors. In general, increasing the quality of equine veterinary care and educating the clients of the value of good care is a win-win for vets, clients and horses.

It is easy to forget that we don't "own" clients, and loyalty is generally a comfortable illusion that we harbor in order to sleep more soundly at night. The reality is that we all have some fantastically loyal clients, but the majority would probably try somebody else if the incentive was sufficient. There is always a "new flavor" effect that is attractive to some, and bad payers will often flock to a new practitioner

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because their reputation has not yet preceded them (we aren't so sorry to see those ones go). Every interaction with a client through ourselves, our support staff and our communication platforms provides an opportunity to remind them of why they use us and want to stay. Great service, communication and education are powerful tools to help us retain clients when temptations arise.

#### Undermine or embrace?

When a new veterinarian moves to your area, you have two general options. One is to resort to whatever measures are necessary to undermine and deter them; in almost every situation, this tactic hurts you as much or more than your competitor.

The other approach is to try to develop a collegial relationship and discover how you could leverage this into a mutually beneficial situation. This vet may have specialized skills that you could utilize in your practice on a controlled referral basis; or they may wish to refer cases to you for medical, surgical or imaging purposes. Entry into an on-call rotation is also possible so everybody can enjoy a better quality of life or accommodate different schedules. Agreements with veterinarians from other practices must be reached after thoroughly documented discussion and terms in order to avoid real or perceived client poaching. There are several articles and AAEP listserv threads discussing how to set up these programs to ensure optimal results. Ultimately, you may just end up with a friendly colleague to share war stories with at meetings, maintain a network

to keep everybody informed of local disease outbreaks and other events, or spot you a vaccine when you run short one day. But isn't that a lot more palatable and less exhausting than spending your days feeling anxious and threatened, sending spies to check up on a competitor, and diminishing your own reputation and professionalism by bad-mouthing another veterinarian? That kind of behavior says a lot more about you than about the person whose reputation you are maligning.

I came across this passage on the Profession Australia website and I think it is an appropriate message for this discussion. *"It is inherent in the definition of a profession that a code of ethics governs the activities of each profession. Such codes require behaviour and practice beyond the personal moral obligations of an individual. They define and demand high standards of behaviour in respect to the services provided to the public and in dealing with professional colleagues. Further, these codes are enforced by the profession and are acknowledged and accepted by the community."*

Our behavior toward colleagues is a critical defining point for professionals. It is up to us to uphold this standard of professionalism and maintain the respect our predecessors have established in the community.

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