

AAEP NEWS

Ethics: What's *really* in a sales radiographic report?

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ETHICAL PRACTICE

Every Day-Every Time

Highlights:

Shifting the radiographic burden from buyers to consignors has created ethical conflicts for veterinarians.

Acquiescing to consignors' desire for watered-down reports has contributed to a buyer-beware environment.

Veterinarians should represent radiographic findings accurately, even if it makes a horse more difficult to sell.

Practices and the services they provide vary geographically and according to the veterinarians' expertise. While not all equine veterinarians are involved in radiographing sales horses and producing radiographic reports for submission to the auction house's Radiographic Repository, the topic warrants serious discussion, and perhaps even more honest introspection, because of the numerous ethical and professional pitfalls that exist when evaluating valuable horses.

Obtaining and interpreting sales radiographs for public auctions can comprise a large part of many practices' revenue stream; as such, veterinarians understandably have a vested interest in retaining their clients' repeat business. But when it comes to sales radiograph reports, it doesn't require much investigation to discover a tangled web of ethical dilemmas encountered by veterinarians when balancing the interests of their clients with what is or ought to be ethically acceptable.

The Radiographic Repository has become a vital component of large public auctions. Its existence and ultimate success is completely dependent upon the submitting veterinarian's skill and accuracy in obtaining appropriate diagnostic images. However, the repository has notably shifted the burden of acquiring and interpreting radiographs on sales horses from the buyers, who alone are aware of their own unique risk tolerances and their intended use for each horse, to the sellers, who have an obvious conflict of interest when it comes to fully disclosing radiographic abnormalities. This arrangement has several important ramifications, not the least of which is the pressure placed on veterinarians to produce "watered down" reports that can be used as sales tools by consignors. It forces veterinarians to balance the objectives of those who are paying for their services—those selling the horses—with what ought to be professionally and ethically acceptable in terms of producing a quality and complete radiographic report. Consider the following.

Currently, it is not uncommon for each sales horse to have two radiograph reports generated. The first accurately and fully describes all radiographic abnormalities. This report provides owners with detailed information regarding the size and character of radiographic lesions, perhaps including an opinion regarding prognosis, all of which are vital pieces of information to ascertain the true soundness potential of each individual horse.

The second report, a "cleaner version," sometimes generated by a different veterinarian, omits findings considered to be insignificant or minimizes the description of those findings in order to be more palatable to potential buyers. These are the reports typically found in the barns and openly shown to potential buyers. Most shrewd buyers see this report as a starting point. They are well aware of whose reports can be taken seriously and whose reports are best ignored. They proceed to hire their own veterinarians to read the submitted radiographs in light of their own unique risk tolerances and the intended use for the horse in question. Unfortunately, some buyers, motivated either by necessity (inability to afford "vetting" all of the horses on their short list) or convenience (a short hip), depend on the consigner-presented report as their sole source of information regarding the radiographic soundness of a horse. These buyers unwisely expose themselves to significantly greater risk by relying on a report that is intended for one purpose: to sell the horse.

In an attempt to avoid producing two differing reports for each horse, some veterinarians produce only a single "soft" report, while simultaneously submitting a second report to consignors listing those horses with problematic findings and additional descriptions that were not included in the "sales" report. The result is the same: the information contained in the report placed in front of the unrepresented buyer is far from complete.

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While the preceding description may seem fraught with ethical and professional vulnerabilities, it is nevertheless presently accurate. As a result, veterinarians find themselves in a no-win situation. Those who attempt to produce only one, fully descriptive report often find their services are no longer required. Those who attempt to find the middle ground of mildly softening reports find themselves repeatedly defending their radiographic descriptions. Still others submit stacks of “no significant findings” reports under the rationale that, “none of the radiographic findings were *significant* in my opinion.”

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The current state of affairs is untenable. Equine veterinarians, consignment houses and consigners have all allowed radiograph reports in the barns and in the back ring where they are currently used as sales tools. In doing so, an avenue was created to encourage some buyers to utilize the free seller-provided radiograph report rather than retain their own veterinarian to read the submitted radiographs. Savvy consigners quickly realized the advantage a “clean” report gave them as a selling tool and leaned on veterinarians to produce softer, more watered-down reports that would be more palatable to unrepresented buyers. Veterinarians, to varying degrees, have acquiesced to this pressure from consignors by producing softer reports, becoming more biased—perhaps unconsciously—towards the sellers’ and consignors’ desire to sell horses. The result is a “buyer-beware” environment where veterinarians are at risk of becoming co-conspirators in a less-than transparent sales arrangement, and consignors are allowed to assume the unprofessional position of explaining the significance of the radiographic findings to potential buyers. While certainly knowledgeable, consignors are not technically qualified to comment on the significance of radiographic lesions beyond sharing anecdotal experiences. The conflict of interest in this scenario is obvious.

Each veterinarian involved in acquiring and interpreting repository radiographs can probably point to examples of radiographic descriptions that are far more lax than warranted. Rather than looking at the actions of others, perhaps some personal introspection is warranted. It may be worth considering if the term “Buyer’s Veterinarian” or

“Seller’s Veterinarian” has even been used to describe one’s professional demeanor. More directly, is one’s radiographic report most valued for what is said on it, or what is not said on it? The answer to that question will reveal a tremendous amount regarding each veterinarian’s personal code of ethical conduct, his or her professional life and the role veterinarians as a whole ought to play in public auctions.

Ethical conduct will at times require veterinarians to have uncomfortable conversations with clients regarding radiographic descriptions that may make a horse more difficult to sell. If a particular veterinarian’s radiographic report is more valued for its lack of content rather than its accurate descriptions, that veterinarian becomes part of the problem of dishonest conduct at public auctions rather than part of the solution. Any other assessment is simply rationalization. A veterinarian’s job is not to sell horses. Rather, it is to accurately represent them, good or bad. Producing softened radiographic reports and becoming biased toward the seller—intentional or otherwise—undermines the veterinarian’s credibility and ultimately harms the equine industry as a whole.

Veterinarians, sales consignors and the auction houses have all allowed this ethically challenging scenario to develop. Resolving it will require participation from all parties involved. However, it is incumbent upon the veterinarians, as the entity most directly tasked with accurately representing each sales horse, to craft its resolution. Should the repository be done away with? Certainly not! Should radiographic reports be removed from the barns and the back ring altogether? That would be ideal but difficult to implement given their ubiquitous presence both electronically and in printed form. Should veterinarians caught misrepresenting horses be made examples of in front of the state board? Hopefully not, but some notion of integrity must be upheld.

Changing the culture of Thoroughbred sales work will not occur swiftly; it will require each participant to seriously consider whether a radiographic report should be most valued for what is said on it, or what is *not* said on it, for its lack of content or its accurate descriptions. The answer to this question will reveal a particular veterinarian’s stance and his or her position as either part of the described problem, or an essential part of its solution.

Real change can begin with one complete and accurate radiograph report at a time.

Be the change.

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