

Two sides of the same scoop: Ice cream, a draft horse and societal expectations

By Mary Scollay, DVM

This past summer while traveling with friends, I came across a field where several Amish families had set up a roadside market selling crafts, jams, baked goods and ice cream. Remarkably, the ice cream churn was powered by an enormous draft gelding on a treadmill. The horse stood quietly until the farmer chirped at him, whereby he began to plod uphill in a rhythmic and determined manner, the treadmill turning the linkage attached to a churn. Out came the iPhones and we all snapped away at this innovative partnership that resulted in—voilà—ice cream. Anything that results in ice cream is a good thing, right?

Several weeks later, a friend alerted me to a post on Facebook that appeared to be of that same horse in that same location, but the Facebook post decried the exploitation of the horse, his enslavement and forced servitude, and the cruelty inflicted in his loss of liberty and free will. How is it possible that two people who observed exactly the same thing reached conclusions so profoundly different? I saw a well-fed horse, for all appearances sound and in good health. He was not fearful of his handler nor did he demonstrate reluctance to perform his task. So, what did the Facebook poster see that I didn't? And what did I see that she didn't?

The horse's inherent needs—safety, food and social interaction—have not changed, but the lens through which a non-agrarian public sees and interprets them has. An evolving societal ethos imposes additional expectations with respect to the stewardship of the horses we care for. In some cases, the expectation is beneficial to the horse; in other cases, benign with no discernable effect; but in some cases, a well-intentioned but ill-informed public can put horses at risk, and that can represent a substantial challenge to the equine practitioner.

Some years ago, a dog trainer opined to me that the biggest contributing factor to pet abandonment was the miscommunication that arises when “people treat dogs like other people, while failing to recognize that dogs treat people like other dogs.” A similar conclusion could be drawn with respect to our relationship with the horse—failed understanding results in unmet or unreasonable expectations. There is a role for the equine veterinarian in recognizing and resolving that conflict—to better meet the needs of the horse.

All aspects of equine ownership and management benefit from ongoing self-examination, but external evaluation is also critical to avoid “because we've always done it that way” as the sole defense of the status quo. As equine veteri-



narians, we should be able to defend our practices—or consider changing them. So, the question is not what we as veterinarians *can* do, but rather what we *should* do.

Ethics is the contemplation of the “should,” not the “can”; and the “should” includes context that requires consideration. Keeping the arthritic 30-year-old mare comfortable enough to ramble around the pasture may engender a different “should” than the lame performance horse that the owner wants to finish out the show season rather than give an early layoff—and the “should” is impacted by societal expectations that the veterinarian needs to be aware of. Which is not to say that the veterinarian is required to accede to the societal ethos if, as the advocate for the horse, they believe to acquiesce will result in a failure to meet the horse's inherent needs. The veterinarian has a role as educator in fulfilling their duty as advocate for the horse.

It's worth noting that evolution of public sensibility about the role of animals is neither new nor static. In the 1930s, Seabiscuit, generally acknowledged to have been chronically
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ETHICAL PRACTICE
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