

# AAEP NEWS

## Ethics: Ethical practice yields professional and personal satisfaction

By W. Thomas Riddle, DVM

A recent survey asked AAEP members to rank issues based on importance to them on a personal level. Among the top five concerns were ethics (No. 2) and public image (No. 5). A strong interest in ethics and public image is healthy, not only for the veterinarians themselves, but also for their clients and patients.

Historically, veterinarians have always ranked among the top professions regarding honesty and ethical standards, according to Gallup polling. The survey of AAEP members indicates that equine veterinarians continue to realize the importance of ethical behavior and are concerned about maintaining a positive public image. This is exciting news for the future of our profession!



Dr. W. Thomas Riddle

A veterinarian's public image is affected by multiple factors, including knowledge, competence, caring, availability and certainly ethics. Merriam-Webster defines ethics simply as "rules of behavior based on ideas about what is good and bad." The AAEP Ethical and Professional Guidelines states in its Standards of Profession: "Professional ethics embodies the behaviors of honesty, integrity and kindness while obeying rules and regulations set forth with mutual respect for opinion and preservation of dignity in interpersonal relationships. The conduct should be in a manner that will enhance the worthiness of the profession."

The authors of the AAEP guidelines obviously spent a great deal of time and effort writing a definition of professional ethics. They did this because they knew that for equine veterinary medicine to grow and thrive, ethical practice is essential.

We all have an obligation to practice ethically and to encourage our colleagues to practice in an ethical manner. Everyone faces ethical challenges and, in most cases, we respond appropriately. Some instances are easier than others, and in general the more often we make the right choice, the easier it becomes to consistently make the correct ethical decision. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon older, experienced practitioners to offer support and advice to their colleagues who are facing ethical dilemmas. Wisdom shared by a fellow veterinarian can

have an incredible impact on his or her colleagues. I still remember advice I received from Dr. Harley Sutton years ago when I took the Kentucky State Board examination: "Never be dishonest to help a client because the client will then know that if you were dishonest to help him, you could also be dishonest to hurt him."

While positive reinforcement is generally the best motivating factor, there may be times (and clients) when the more powerful motivation is fear of the loss of your license to practice veterinary medicine or the embarrassment of public censure. There may be some clients who are unable to understand the importance of ethical behavior, but they can understand that if you are unethical you could lose your AAEP membership and your license, causing both you and the client to face possible public ridicule.

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As mentioned earlier, the general public holds veterinarians in very high esteem concerning honesty and ethics. We should all be very proud of the respect the public has for us, and we should take personal responsibility to maintain the high standards that our community expects from us. As Dr. David Ramey wisely stated during his presentation at the 2013 AAEP Annual Convention, "Ethical standards and behavior provide confidence to the public about the reliability and actions they can expect when using the services of a professional. They build trust. In maintaining a strong veterinarian-client relationship, trust is essential. Trust can be hard to both gain and maintain, but it can be lost very easily."

In closing I call on all of us to follow the AAEP guidelines and practice with "honesty, integrity, and kindness." We should do this because it's the right choice for our clients, our patients, and the public; but most of all, because it's the right decision for our own personal well-being.

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