

The importance of communication among colleagues in after-hours and referral cases

By Chris Wilhite, DVM



Dr. Chris Wilhite

The importance of effective communication with clients is easily recognizable. Communication between colleagues on the other hand is no longer at the forefront of people's thoughts. I see this continually cropping up in two particular areas: practices' after-hours availability and the referral of cases.

There is no doubt that work-life balance is important for our mental and physical wellbeing. With this in mind, each of us can appreciate the difficulty in trying to provide 24x7 care for our clients and patients. The past year has taught us that life happens and that there are going to be circumstances, oftentimes out of our control, that will disrupt our normal schedule. In addition, our clients and patients have issues that need attention in the evening, at night, and on weekends and holidays.

The burden of providing emergency coverage for clients and their animals is not to be taken lightly. What tends to compound this problem is when colleagues from neighboring practices decide not to share in this responsibility. It seems that some practices are becoming more comfortable with either not responding to after-hours calls or letting their clients go elsewhere for emergency care. Obviously, we all have times when we are legitimately too busy to respond to every call in a timely fashion, and this is understandable. What is most concerning is seeing and hearing about this happening in all areas of the country with increasing regularity.

Historically, when we were unable to provide emergency services—whether it be for a CE meeting, illness or vacation—we would make arrangements in advance with neighboring practices to help provide for care for our clients and patients. Asking a colleague if they are available and willing to assist while you are away and before any emergencies arise would seem to be a common courtesy. In addition, it is an added service for your clients so they know who to contact should they need after-hours help. From my experience, most clients are more understanding and remain loyal to a practice if they are made aware of when you will be unavailable. It

is easy to notify clients in advance to facilitate a seamless transition should the need arise. However you choose to give notice to your clients, they will be less stressed and more likely to return to your practice once you are back.

Similarly, the lack of effective communication when referring a patient to a colleague can also have a big impact on whether or not the client returns to your practice. I have seen this firsthand time and again. Some veterinarians are great at this, and their clients are well-prepared on arrival. In these cases, the owner already has been informed of what to expect in terms of diagnostics and costs. The referral veterinarian is fully aware of the case and history of the patient, which helps put the client more at ease. These scenarios work out well for the patient, the client and the referring veterinarian. In the end, the client has more trust and appreciation for what their regular veterinarian has done to help their horse.

Conversely, when the effort to communicate has not been made, the results are not always as rosy. The client can quickly lose faith in their regular veterinarian if he or she has not helped to facilitate the referral. The client might try to pass blame onto their veterinarian for not making a correct diagnosis, not providing

the proper treatment or not recognizing the severity of the problem. At this point, the client is upset and may start to question the competence of and care provided by their regular veterinarian. The end result might be the loss of the client altogether. With appropriate communication prior to the referral, this type of speculation can be terminated immediately, and all attention can be focused on treating the patient.

There are numerous ways to connect with colleagues that are easy and efficient. Depending on the situation, a phone call, text message or email to a colleague can be a big help in providing proper care for your patients and retaining your clients. Many issues can be resolved or avoided completely if we strive to communicate well with each other and put the horse first.

Asking a colleague if they are available and willing to assist while you are away and before any emergencies arise would seem to be a common courtesy.



ETHICAL PRACTICE
Every Day-Every Time

Dr. Wilhite is a founding partner of Wilhite & Freese Equine Hospital in Peculiar, Mo., and a member of the AAEP's Professional Conduct & Ethics Committee.

Ethics in action

As an educational resource for members, the AAEP's Professional Conduct & Ethics Committee has compiled synopses of real-life ethical situations and issues addressed by the committee in recent years. The case series began in the November 2020 issue, and a different matter is being presented each month, with names omitted to protect the privacy of those involved.

Case of the month – February

“Dr. D,” an AAEP member, was fined \$5,000 by the state veterinary board for practicing with a suspended license. Their veterinary license was suspended for 6 months with an additional 12-month probationary period. They were also fined \$5,000 for failure to keep medical records as required by the state practice act.

The AAEP's Professional Conduct & Ethics Committee became aware of this action and sent Dr. D a letter of

inquiry requesting their account of what occurred. Dr. D responded and the committee requested Dr. D meet for a hearing. Dr. D did not agree to attend the hearing.

Outcome: Dr. D's AAEP membership was suspended.

Update: Six years later, Dr. D re-applied for membership in the AAEP. The Professional Conduct & Ethics Committee reviewed the application and requested Dr. D attend a hearing with the committee. Dr. D did not comply with the request.

Outcome: Dr. D's membership application was denied.



ASSOCIATION

What's next for recently passed Horseracing Integrity & Safety Act?

Signed into law Dec. 27 as part of the federal omnibus bill, the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Act (HISA) is intended to bring uniformity to the sport by putting medication control and safety programs under an independent, non-governmental authority. Although HISA is now law, there is much that needs to happen before it can go into effect, which must occur before July 1, 2022.

The previously formed nominating committee, of which AAEP past president Dr. Jerry Black is a member, will now determine the nine individuals who will comprise the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority—essentially the board of directors. This could occur by the end of the first quarter.

From there, the nominating committee will name the members of two working committees focused on racetrack safety and on anti-doping and medication control. The AAEP's Racing Committee has submitted a list of names and credentials for consideration for the authority as well as the working committees.

As a component of HISA's implementation, the Federal Trade Commission will need to approve the anti-doping and medication control program and racetrack safety



program. The FTC will review programs developed by the authority and allow for public comment before considering approval. As such, the specific impacts of HISA on the industry and on veterinarians' ability to treat horses won't be known until later. The AAEP will continue to monitor and keep members apprised of ongoing HISA developments.