

Ethics: The responsibility of the referral veterinarian

By Faith E. Hughes, DVM, DACVS

In today's practice environment, referral of a patient is often in the best interest of that patient and is geographically available to most veterinarians. The logistics of referral are critical, and the importance of the roles played by each party—general practitioner, referral veterinarian and client/horse owner—cannot be underestimated. This includes the events before, during and after the patient receives care. The focus of this article is the responsibility of the receiving referral veterinarian.

Referral of a case means that the general practitioner is acknowledging the need for help. It puts them in a position of vulnerable trust in the person they are referring the patient to. It is important to recognize and honor that trust. The cornerstones of doing this are respect, communication and education.

Respect means knowing that the general practitioner has practiced to the best of their ability. Due to the nature of the different types of practice, it is typical that what may be a unique and puzzling case for the general practitioner may be more common and clearer to a referral veterinarian. This is because a referral practice is predominantly comprised of the difficult and oddball cases. If a rare event is frequently experienced, the description changes from rare to routine. Years spent in specialty training are largely focused on less common but often more severe equine ailments. It is to the advantage of the equine industry that these types of problems do not make up the majority of general practice.

Communication from the referral veterinarian involves two clients: the general practitioner and the owner. Effective owner communication begins with a history, develops as the patient is examined and treated, and continues after the patient is discharged. Prognosis and estimated costs are always woven into these communications. Effective general practitioner communication is no different. Although the content of the conversations may be on a different level, general practitioners are interested in the exact same information, and it is likely that the owner is asking them for continued advice and interpretation of information.



Dr. Faith E. Hughes

The owner often has a closer relationship with the general practitioner, and that is whose counsel they seek as a case progresses. The general practitioner is usually the person with the greatest ability to guide or convince an owner regarding important decisions about care and treatment. It is beneficial for all parties involved that the general practitioner stay informed. The worst case scenario is for the general practitioner to find out from the owner that the patient has passed. It is critical that both the general practitioner and the referral veterinarian are on the same page throughout the case.

Education is part of most activities in most veterinarians' lives. We are all obsessive learners. I cannot think of a single example in the course of my career that the general practitioner had no interest in learning more about the case they sent in. This can also be a delicate area. It is true that in some instances, a patient was treated inappropriately or at least should have been referred earlier. Above all, the goal is to preserve the relationship between a general practitioner and their client, which means never second guessing the decisions that were made prior to referral with the client. In some cases it is warranted to share information with the general practitioner that may help them with similar cases in the future; however, this should always be done in a supportive manner and always with the utmost respect.

Education is a two-way street. Simply being board certified and working in a referral environment does not translate into being a better veterinarian. A referral veterinarian closes their own door to learning if they do not consider the suggestions from a general practitioner that reflect a different perspective and experience. It is also important that when a case does not go well, all parties are satisfied that everything that could be done was done.

There are no islands. We are all connected and interdependent. Referral practices do not exist without general practitioners. General practitioners must have clients who trust them, and their practices are stronger for those clients if they have a solid relationship with a referral practice. Clients must have general practitioners who will care for their horses whenever and wherever they are, and they are best served if the general practitioner is comfortable with referral options.

Dr. Hughes is a partner at Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, Fla., and a member of the AAEP's Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee.