

## What is your ethical responsibility when responding to an emergency?

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Dr. Barb Crabbe

How many times have you received an emergency call for a horse that you simply couldn't help, either because you were too far away, didn't have the necessary equipment, or were busy working on another horse? How much did it bother you?

If you are a veterinarian who is on call for emergencies, chances are you wrestle with this issue on a regular basis. If you find yourself facing this scenario frequently, it is likely to be causing you distress.



Dr. Lisa Hanelt

Equine veterinarians have an ethical responsibility to care for the horse. In fact, the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the AVMA clearly states that "a veterinarian should first consider the needs of the patient to prevent and relieve disease, suffering, or disability." Yet, what

happens when the veterinarian faced with an emergency can't respond because they lack the necessary resources, whether that means equipment, facility, skills or simply their own time or emotional energy?

Equine veterinarians have finite resources, including time and emotional energy. Balancing the need to provide emergency services with our duty to ourselves is an increasingly urgent quandary within the profession, as evidenced by the startling statistics related to veterinarians leaving practice. We know 50% of new equine veterinarians leave equine practice within five years. This is not sustainable. We also know emergency availability is a major issue leading to veterinarians electing work without equine on-call responsibilities.

There are numerous discussions of how to set boundaries by pooling resources and working together to create emergency cooperatives that help relieve the burden of providing emergency care. Just as important is helping veterinarians develop the tools they need to justify refusal of care as an ethical choice when circumstances require it. Any veterinarian who offers emergency on call must also occasionally say "no" in order to preserve their ability to get up and fight another day.

There's no question that the decision to refuse care for a horse in need can create a significant source of moral



distress for a veterinarian. Moral distress, or the realization that one is constrained from taking an action that one knows is ethically appropriate, is a leading cause of burnout. Statistics tell us that equine veterinarians who experience this type of burnout are likely to leave the profession altogether. Without equine veterinarians, the landscape of equine emergency care shifts dramatically, to the detriment of the care of the horse.

The ethical framework of utilitarianism tells us that finding the answer to an ethical dilemma depends on making the decision that has the most benefit to the greatest number. If we apply this framework to the question of whether we have an ethical responsibility to provide care for "every emergency, every time," we can easily answer no. More damage will be done to horses everywhere if equine veterinarians continue to leave the profession at such a rate that none remain to provide emergency care at all. But what about our duty to the individual horse?

Any equine veterinarian who has experienced on call understands the powerful duty to serve patients and clients, and a majority of equine veterinarians will continue to feel helpless when confronted with an emergency to which they either cannot respond or cannot adequately manage with available resources. We need to understand that our duties as veterinarians expand beyond our patients and their owners. We also owe a duty to ourselves and to our colleagues.

As veterinarians, it's time we recognize our duty to ourselves and begin to understand that it is ethically permissible to create boundaries, even if that means we won't be available for "every emergency, every time." Our mental health depends on it. We also owe a duty to our regular patients and clients to ensure they have access to emergency care. Finally, there is a balance: We must recognize our duty to our colleagues who are likely to experience extraordinary pressure if increasing numbers of equine veterinarians refuse to provide emergency services at all.

The answer to the ethical dilemma surrounding provision of emergency care requires that we work together to find solutions that ensure individual veterinarians feel com-

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**ETHICAL PRACTICE**  
Every Day-Every Time

*Dr. Crabbe was a practitioner and the owner of a general equine practice in the Portland, Ore.-area for over 30 years. She is now involved with curriculum development in veterinary ethics and serves on both the AAEP's Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee and the AVMA's Council on Veterinary Services. Dr. Hanelt is an equine veterinarian based in Massachusetts and serves of the AAEP's Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee.*