

Mother was always right

Maternal words of wisdom help shape professional ethics

By Peter R. Morresey, BVSc, MVM, MACVSc, DACT, DACVIM, CVA



Dr. Peter Morresey

Most of us have come to realize the truth in the above headline, especially when it comes to the ongoing formation of our professional ethics.

As new graduates, we all have gotten in over our heads. One of mine was a bovine dystocia during my days in mixed practice. Exhaustion and a desire for expediency led me to call in a senior member of

the practice. He arrived, barked at me, unceremoniously completed the dystocia, berated me at length for the situation in full view of the client, and left with hardly a word to said client (now pale with mouth agape wondering why anyone would work within that culture).

I made up my mind on a few things that day: I would never ask that person for help again; I would willingly give my help to anyone when able; and I would never criticize another veterinarian in front of a client, preferring, if necessary, a quiet, frank and beneficial conversation afterwards. Before our mouths are engaged, we should always remember that enshrined within veterinary practice acts are non-disparagement clauses.

Mother would say, “Treat others like you want to be treated.”

I was still the young vet in town and worked for a successful horse trainer who was a longstanding client of the practice. Another veterinarian had extended their practice into the area and coveted this client. Out of the blue, I was asked to administer an anabolic to a horse in competition. The justification was, “your predecessor didn’t get caught.” My reply was when inevitably caught, my right to practice and his right to train were revoked, so not happening. Within 10 days, I no longer worked for that trainer, a chronic case was in the care of the other practitioner with no warning, and the owner of that horse went from grateful to livid. Particularly stinging was the instigator was someone I had looked up to as an extern veterinary student, and they were a regular on the family farm. In practice, I had let them borrow equipment and supplies when they were caught short.

This breach of professionalism and collegiality cut deeply. To this day, I wonder if the anabolic was administered. My competence was called needlessly into doubt for financial gain. The ethics of supersession were breached.

Fast forward 18 months, and I was offered a job by this veterinarian. They couldn’t understand why I didn’t accept. Our values were completely misaligned.

Mother would say, “Love many, trust few, always paddle your own canoe.”

Years later, and with a change in hemisphere, I am in referral equine practice. A valuable yearling had flipped over backwards and was unable to stand. Blood poured from both nostrils. The farm manager was crying outside the stall repeating, “Pete you have to save this horse.” Time and sheer force of will from the amazing technician team around me got the horse standing. A slight head tilt remained, gait deficits were on the improve and, while a prolonged recovery was ahead, the horse no longer met requirements for euthanasia. This had been relayed to the insurance company. The story takes a dark turn: the long shadow of the dollar altered the farm’s desired outcome. It was first requested, then demanded, I immediately euthanize as the horse would never race. The referring veterinarian, fearful of blowback, refused to support me.

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A second opinion agreed with my assessment. The client became belligerent and removed the horse from my care, vowing never to send me another patient. The insurance adjustor during our farm visit agreed their policy requirements for euthanasia were not met. We left a hostile manager. Talks led to a financial, not clinical, decision (partial payout and the farm kept the horse).

Outcome? The insurance company never questions my opinion of a horse in my care. The farm sent me cases again. The horse raced and ended up in the money. The farm went out of business.

Mother would say, “In the end all you have is your name.”

Our dedicated nursing staff saved a maladjusted neonate. Discharge was scheduled to a happy client. Colic occurred and surgery was needed. The client’s tone soured, “...you need to say the foal never got on the mare so it’s not worth doing surgery...” As problematic as the underwriter knew it was, the client demanded I say otherwise so they could collect. They were told firmly I would not

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Ethics, continued

revise my daily updates, nor would I falsify the hospital record clearly stating the foal was on the mare. The room temperature dropped 30 degrees in 30 seconds.

The foal went to surgery, swiftly recovered and enjoyed a successful athletic career. I had serviced this client over many years. I chalked it up to “temporary loss of reason” as the impossibility of their request was obvious. Had I buckled, future courtesies would likely have been sought.

Mother would say, “Be sure your sins will find you out.”

Anecdotes maybe; learning experiences, most definitely. Ethics are common sense. Showing respect to each other makes us all look good. People will disillusion you over a dollar, so be approachable but trust sparingly. You are long remembered for your deeds. If it stinks, you can never bury it deeply enough.

If you recognize yourself above, that is purely intentional. You know who you are, or when you have been that person.

MEMBERSHIP

AAEP mourns the loss of three members



Dr. Timothy O'Brien

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Dr. Timothy O'Brien, who served on faculty at the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine for 39 years until his retirement in 2008, died July 26 at age 81.

A veterinary graduate of the University of Illinois and diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Radiologists, Dr. O'Brien was a longtime professor of radiology who also served as chair of the Department of Radiological Services and chair of Surgical and Radiological Sciences. His leadership was crucial to development of the school's veterinary diagnostic imaging training program, and many of his mentees in clinical research became faculty at UC Davis and other veterinary schools.

Dr. O'Brien developed special projections to evaluate disorders of the carpal, navicular and pedal bones, as well as the fetlock, stifle and tarsal joints of horses. In 1979, with his wife Janet, he founded and directed for more than four decades the annual Lake Tahoe Equine Disease Conference; and in 2005, he published a monograph *O'Brien's Radiology for the Ambulatory Equine Practitioner* to guide acquisition of high-quality radiographic images of equine limbs.

Passionate about continuing education and improving the quality of equine radiographs, Dr. O'Brien for many years delivered the highly regarded Radiology/Equine Lameness Panel at the AAEP Annual Convention. AAEP recognized his many contributions to the profession by awarding Dr. O'Brien its Distinguished Educator Award in 2008. He also served AAEP on the Educational Programs, Purchase Exam, and Research committees.



Dr. R. Jay Bickers

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Dr. R. Jay Bickers, owner of Bickers Equine Surgery and Consulting in Weatherford, Texas, died June 20. He was 59.

A board-certified surgeon, Dr. Bickers started his practice in 2017 after nearly 11 years as an equine surgeon at Brazos Valley Equine Hospital – Stephenville in Texas. His practice focused on mobile equine surgery, acupuncture and chiropractic as well as lameness, X-ray and ultrasound consultation.

Dr. Bickers received his veterinary degree from Texas A&M University and completed his surgical residency at the University of Tennessee, where he helped develop the Emergency and Critical Care Department as the first emergency clinician.



Dr. Gary Shelton

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Dr. Gary Shelton, animal welfare advocate and founder of the Shelton Veterinary Clinics in northeast Florida, died June 20 at age 63.

Dr. Shelton opened his first clinic in Interlachen in 1985 soon after receiving his veterinary degree from the University of Florida. He opened additional practices in Elkton and Bunnell. He also gathered with several other veterinarians to open the St. Augustine Regional Veterinary Emergency Center. From 2012-2017, Dr. Shelton served as medical director of the Flagler Humane Society in Palm Coast, ensuring shelter animals received appropriate medical care to facilitate adoption.