

Who decides?

The importance of including owners in the decision-making process for their horses

By Barb Crabbe, DVM



Dr. Barb Crabbe

She is smart, educated, knowledgeable and loves her horses. She will always choose the horse's best interest over wins in the competition arena or financial gain. Let's share some details of this true story.

The horse was examined for lameness and treated by a veterinarian who worked in close association with the horse's trainer. The trainer was managing the horse for the owner who lived on the opposite coast. Although the primary lameness identified was in a hind limb, the horse

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The horse was a lovely 6-year-old gelding, actively competing in the hunter ring at one of the most prestigious circuits in the country. He had been purchased a year previously, following a full prepurchase exam. The owner is a human surgeon and a lifelong horse owner who has been actively involved at the highest level of the sport for decades.

had his thoracic facet joints and front coffin joints injected with steroids. He was then administered a bisphosphonate product and an NSAID. The first his owner heard about these treatments was when he was subsequently diagnosed with renal failure and sent to a referral hospital for almost two weeks of intensive management. She was devastated.

The owner was unaware that her horse was having problems, and the veterinarian never communicated with the owner prior to examining or treating the horse. When the owner later questioned why the horse was examined and treated, the veterinarian told her that she thought he was being prepared for a sale. When the owner asked why a pre-treatment renal panel hadn't been performed and why NSAIDs were given when they are generally avoided in conjunction with a bisphosphonate product, the veterinarian didn't provide an answer. Most importantly, the veterinarian did not explain why she did not

inform the owner about her horse's condition prior to treatment, or why the owner wasn't given the option to decide what treatments would be carried out.

This situation begs the question: Who should be the decision maker for our equine patients? They clearly can't decide for themselves. In human medicine, when a patient lacks decisional capacity, a surrogate decision maker is chosen to make medical decisions on their behalf. This surrogate is expected to make those decisions first based on a substituted judgment standard; in other words, what would the patient have wanted if they could choose for themselves? When the patient's preferences are unknown, the surrogate must turn to the best-interest standard; that is, what would be in the best interest of the patient?

In veterinary medicine, a substituted judgment standard isn't possible—we can't expect a surrogate decision maker to know what our patient might prefer. We will never know. Instead, in all cases, we depend on a surrogate to make decisions based on the best interest of the patient. What diagnostic and treatment decisions are most likely to offer long-term benefits? Recognizing the most appropriate surrogate decision maker for a patient is a critical part of our job as veterinarians. And advocating for the best interest of the horse is the most important role we play.

How do we identify a surrogate? Is it the trainer, who is under enormous pressure to produce competition results or a successful sale? Is it the veterinarian, who may have a financial interest in placating the trainer or providing certain treatments? Or is it the owner, who ideally cares about the long-term health and well-being of the horse? While we can't guarantee that every owner will make best-interest decisions for their horses, few want to see them harmed. Most will choose the diagnostic and treatment option that is most likely to lead to long-term health and soundness. In any event, all owners should be fully informed and given the option to make decisions on their horse's behalf. In the case of this 6-year-old hunter, the owner was experienced, educated, and clearly had her horse's best interests at heart. She would have been the perfect surrogate. Yet she was denied the option to decide.

Critically, had this owner been informed and allowed to ask her questions prior to the treatments having been performed, she would have made different decisions. She would have clarified that the horse was not being prepared for sale, and most likely would have opted for

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