

Revised Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics adopted in 2024

By Barb Crabbe, DVM, MA Bioethics



Dr. Barb Crabbe

As equine veterinarians, we commonly face ethical dilemmas in our daily work. At times, these dilemmas may seem overwhelming, and we find ourselves looking for advice to help us make a difficult decision. We turn to our colleagues, mentors, and even our families for help. But do we ever think about seeking guidance from the AVMA's Principles of Veterinary Medical

Ethics (PVME)? This document can answer many of our questions about ethical decision making, and after a complete revision was approved in June 2024, it may be just what we need to help us make these difficult decisions.

The overhaul of the PVME was initiated in 2022 and sought input from a working group composed of industry leaders from every corner of the veterinary profession. Prior to 2024, the PVME consisted solely of a list of behaviors, or a Code of Conduct, that veterinarians were expected to follow. In addition to an updated Code of Conduct, the revised document now includes a section outlining three overarching Principles, which brings the PVME more into alignment with Codes of Ethics of the majority of professional organizations.

The AAEP's Board of Directors has endorsed the new PVME. Because equine practice involves ethical dilemmas that are unique within veterinary medicine, the AAEP also recently approved an addendum that addresses some of these unique concerns, including prepurchase examinations, third-party decision makers, contingency fees, and emergency care.

How can the PVME help guide ethical decision making? Let's take a look at some common scenarios where this document provides specific guidance for making an ethical decision:

Scenario 1

You are asked to endorse a product, and offered compensation for providing a testimonial that will be used in advertising? Is that something you should do?

Section B.4.c. of the PVME clearly states that "A veterinarian who provides an endorsement or testimonial for a commercial product should publicly disclose if they are being compensated for their support, including when the veterinarian has ownership interest in the product."

Scenario 2

You love working up lameness cases and would like to promote yourself as a veterinarian who specializes in lameness. Can you call yourself a "lameness specialist" on your website?

The answer can be found in Section 3.6.b. of the PVME where it states that "It is unethical for a veterinarian to identify themselves as certified by an AVMA-recognized specialty organization if such certification has not been awarded and maintained. Use of the term 'specialist' should be reserved for a veterinarian who is currently board-certified by an AVMA American Board of Veterinary Specialties-recognized veterinary specialty organization or other veterinary specialty organization that maintains comparable certification requirements."

For the ethical dilemmas identified as more specific to equine practice, similar specific guidance can be found in the AAEP's addendum to the PVME. For example:

Scenario 3

You are asked to perform a prepurchase exam on a horse you have provided routine care for in the past. Do you have an ethical obligation to refuse the request?

The AAEP's addendum topic Prepurchase Examinations, section 4, can guide you on how to proceed. "If the veterinarian is familiar with and/or has provided previous medical care for the horse they are asked to examine, both buyer and seller should be informed of the previous relationship, and the veterinarian should ensure that all previous medical records are authorized for release by the seller prior to initiating the examination. In situations where one or more of the buyer, seller or veterinarian is uncomfortable with the veterinarian's familiarity with the horse, referral to an outside veterinarian should be recommended."

Finally, how can the PVME help us if the dilemma we are facing isn't as clearly answered as in the scenarios above? That's where the addition of foundational principles enters the equation. Principles adopted by the AVMA and AAEP include:

Stewardship: Veterinarians have an ethical responsibility to alleviate suffering, promote health, and act in the best interests of their patients in balance with the interests of their clients, the environment, and the public.

continued on next page



ETHICAL PRACTICE
Every Day-Every Time

Dr. Crabbe is a member of the AAEP's Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee and the AVMA's Council on Veterinary services, where she served as chairperson of the committee in charge of updating the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics. She holds a master's degree in Bioethics from the Neiswanger Institute of Bioethics at Stritch School of Medicine.