

Ethics in action: Medical error case study

By Barb Crabbe, DVM, MA Bioethics



Dr. Barb Crabbe

As an educational resource for members, the AAEP's Professional Conduct & Ethics Committee has compiled synopses of real-life ethical situations and issues addressed by the committee in recent years. Following is an example regarding a medical error committed by a recently graduated veterinarian while administering intravenous sedation to a horse for a dental procedure.

Scenario: A recently graduated veterinarian administers intravenous sedation to a horse for a dental procedure. The horse suddenly flies backward, falls to the ground and exhibits seizure behavior. The experienced technician, who has been a longtime, trusted employee of the practice and is working with the veterinarian that day, quickly tells the client that the horse must have had an adverse reaction to the medication. The veterinarian clearly recognizes that this was an intra-arterial injection. What should they do?

Discussion: This scenario has a number of complicating factors, and all are addressed within the basic ethical principles of Stewardship, Integrity, and Respect outlined in the AVMA's Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics (PVME).

In the case described above, the first conflict is related to the question of "who has agency?" The inexperienced veterinarian who has recently joined a new practice may feel the experienced technician is in a position of power. It is important for the veterinarian to recognize that they are actually the one who should be communicating with the owner, and that it would be appropriate for them to correct the technician.

In order to uphold the principle of **Respect**, the correction should be made tactfully to both protect the technician's reputation and preserve the professional relationship. It is worth mentioning that it is the responsibility of the practice owner to establish the appropriate dynamic that should exist between a new veterinarian and a veteran member of the practice team. With this understanding in place, the veterinarian can feel supported in their role as decision maker and primary communicator, which is particularly important in complicated situations like the one described.

The second factor to consider is what would be in the patient's best interest. The veterinarian's ethical duty to do what is best for the horse falls under the PVME's principle of **Stewardship**. Setting the record straight about this event avoids the potential that the horse goes through life with the label that he "can't be sedated" because he is "allergic to the medication," and ensures he'll be treated normally with effective sedatives should they be required in the future.

The final, and perhaps most important, consideration in this case is the ethical responsibility of the veterinarian to be "honest and truthful in all interactions with clients, patients and their community," which is the definition of the principle of **Integrity** in the PVME. The veterinarian should be honest with the client and

tell them exactly what happened. In cases like this one, the veterinarian may be concerned that telling the client that the medication had actually been administered in the artery could lead to legal consequences. In reality, evidence suggests that honest communication regarding medical errors is not only ethical, it is also less likely to result in legal action.

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Recommendation: The veterinarian in this case should immediately and tactfully correct the technician and tell the owner that the medication was administered in the artery instead of the vein. They should explain that this is a complication that is known to occur, and that the reaction they all observed is typical for an intra-arterial injection.



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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.