

Demystifying the AAEP's ethical process

By David Foley, CAE



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From time to time, the question arises about AAEP's role in the ethical conduct of its members. Stories occasionally appearing in the industry press often elicit calls from members to the elected leaders of the AAEP, members of the Professional Conduct & Ethics Committee (PCEC), or the AAEP staff wondering if AAEP is paying attention or taking any action. The short answer is yes, we are!

Ethical complaints are handled on a case-by-case basis and follow a well-defined process. They're also handled within the PCEC and AAEP Board of Directors; therefore, visibility to action being taken by the organization has not been public knowledge.

To better understand the process, it's important to remember that the AAEP is a professional membership association dedicated to the health and welfare of horses. While not a regulatory agency, the AAEP has established rules and procedures to manage membership status, ensuring that members adhere to high ethical standards. Membership status in the association, however, is the only authority the PCEC and the AAEP board have. Fortunately, the disciplinary function of the PCEC is not something that occupies much of the committee's agenda, with the primary role being one of member education on ethical topics.

The AAEP does have a commitment to professional ethics and expects members to act with honesty and integrity, always prioritizing the health and welfare of horses. Members must comply with various codes of ethics, including those of the American Veterinary Medical Association and the AAEP itself. They should also follow the rules of racing, horse shows, sales and other equine events, as well as all relevant laws. Any violation of these standards can lead to disciplinary action, including revocation or denial of membership. The PCEC has developed thresholds that trigger such action, generally based on either suspension time or the amount of the fine issued by the governing regulatory body.

The Process

When an action is initiated, the AAEP provides the member with a notice detailing the reasons for the action and giving them 30 days to respond. The Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee then investigates the facts and considers the merits of the action. The PCEC evaluates

the severity of the charges, any evidence of rehabilitation and other relevant factors.

If the PCEC decides that a hearing is necessary, they notify the involved parties, providing at least 60 days' notice. During the hearing (sometimes occurring at the annual convention), parties have the right to legal counsel, to present witnesses and evidence, and to cross-examine witnesses. The PCEC can accept any evidence it deems appropriate, even if it doesn't follow formal court rules.

After the hearing, the PCEC makes a recommendation, which can include dismissing the complaint, revoking or suspending membership, or taking other disciplinary actions. The decision is then submitted to the board of directors, which votes on the recommendation. A two-thirds majority is required to deny, revoke or suspend membership.

If an applicant or member disagrees with the board's decision, they can petition for a rehearing or appeal. A rehearing is granted only if there is new evidence that couldn't have been discovered earlier. Appeals are heard by the officers of the AAEP, who review the record to determine if there were material errors or failures to follow procedures.

The AAEP's disciplinary guidelines also include general provisions, such as the confidentiality of proceedings, which is likely why some may think the AAEP is not engaged. Additionally, since the AAEP is not a regulatory body and doesn't really perform an investigative function (like a state licensing board), the process can sometimes take longer if the individual goes through a lengthy appeals process with the body initiating the complaint. AAEP guidelines require that we wait until that regulatory body process has concluded before we can take any action.

The AAEP's Policy for Membership Denial and Disciplinary Procedures, accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/mpfx4298>, is designed to uphold the highest standards of professional ethics in equine veterinary practice. By ensuring that members act with integrity and prioritize the welfare of horses, the AAEP maintains the trust and respect of the equine community.

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