

AAEP NEWS

Ethics: Ethics, the VCPR and doing what the client requests

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Highlights:

Shared decision making, economic pressures can lead to abuse of the VCPR.

Communication is critical to avoiding uncomfortable and ethically challenging requests.

Severing a strained relationship with an owner can be in the veterinarian's best interest.

The relationship between a veterinarian, their client and the horse—the veterinary-client-patient relationship (VCPR)—is one of tremendous opportunity to do good for the horse. When horse owners and veterinarians work together, the health and quality of life of the horse can be improved significantly. But while this therapeutic alliance involves important and specific obligations on the part of the veterinarian, owners and trainers also have obligations so as to not put the veterinarian in an ethically compromising position.

Veterinarians have a fiduciary relationship

For an effective diagnostic and therapeutic process, there must be a bond of trust between the veterinarian and client. For example, veterinarians trust clients to share all relevant information about their horses; clients trust veterinarians to make accurate diagnoses and provide effective treatments. Trust builds a special bond. Unfortunately, that bond can be easily abused or taken for granted.

The evolution of the VCPR

Historically, horse owners and trainers were willing to readily defer to the professional authority of the veterinarian, much as they were willing to defer to physicians in matters of their own healthcare.

In the 20th century, however, things began to change with the advent of shared decision making. Under this arrangement, the owner or trainer makes views and choices based on personal beliefs, as well as on information obtained from friends, magazines and the Internet. Regardless of their merit, these views are important for a treating veterinarian when considering an appropriate course of treatment. In many situations, veterinary decision making is no longer simply a matter of what the veterinarian thinks is best.

When the VCPR gets complicated

In most circumstances, the VCPR works well. However, while shared decision making is empowering to horse owners, the explosion of readily available but often conflicting information and advice to horse owners can confuse veterinary decision-making and lead to requests made of the veterinarian that may not be in the best interest of the horse. Such requests often are made in the name of improved or increased performance.



Equine veterinarians may face requests to inject substances that may contravene established rules, receive requests to falsify records, or perform procedures which may not be in the horse's best interest. These requests can raise serious conflicts for ethical veterinarians, conflicts about which owners and trainers may be unaware.

Economic Pressures

Of course, veterinarians do not have to provide services that are fundamentally opposed to their personal beliefs. However, veterinary medicine is also a business. Thus, when a client presents a veterinarian with an ethically challenging request, the veterinarian may feel pressure to do the procedure or otherwise lose business. Economic pressure is a tremendous motivator; unfortunately, such motivation is not always in the best interest of the horse or the VCPR.

Other considerations can make simply responding to a client's request for unneeded or unethical services uncomfortable, as well. In most circumstances, any repercussions will fall on the veterinarian. For example:

- If a horse has an adverse reaction to a substance injected at a client's request, the responsibility for those reactions will fall on the veterinarian. "Because the client asked me to," is not a tenable defense if malpractice action is pursued.
- If records are falsified in an effort to assist a client—for example, scratching a horse from a race or writing an excuse from a show—a veterinarian can be suspended and/or fined. It's unreasonable to expect a veterinarian to jeopardize their license in an effort to respond to an unethical request.

Communication is critical

Many uncomfortable situations can be resolved with good communication skills. Requests may not be clear; owners may feel as if they are wasting the veterinarian's valuable time; they may omit details of the horse's history which they feel are not important; they may fail to mention important things that they fear will place them in an

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unfavorable light; owners may not have a good understanding of veterinary medicine and its terminology; they may not even know that their requests put the veterinarian in an uncomfortable position.

The key to avoiding such conflicts is open communication. At all times, but particularly when faced with ethically challenging requests, veterinarians, horse owners and trainers should:

- meet in person when discussing difficult issues
- keep the horse's best interest at the forefront of all discussions
- listen without interrupting
- acknowledge and legitimize the concerns and rationales for the owner's requests
- explain one's own concerns and rationales
- suggest an examination of the horse in light of the concerns expressed
- ask directly and kindly about other areas of concern

What happens when an owner or trainer insists on an ethically questionable course of action?

While shared decision making can help facilitate understanding between owners, trainers and veterinarians, in some cases, uncomfortable demands of the veterinarian may still be made. Resolving such demands can require some skill on the part of the veterinarian. For example, a

veterinarian may suggest, "I understand that you have heard that there is a medication that can help your horse, but I also think that he will get better if you just wait a bit longer. What do you think?" Or, "I understand that you think this is what is best for your horse. Would you be willing to look over this information sheet and then call me so we can talk about it?"

What can a veterinarian do with a particularly frustrating owner or trainer?

Sometimes the needs or demands of the trainer are unyielding, and they strain the therapeutic alliance. There may be occasions when no agreeable compromise can be reached. In such cases, it may be in the veterinarian's best interest to sever the relationship. A veterinarian simply cannot practice when feeling their ethical standards are under siege.

The VCPR holds considerable healing power for the horse. However, it is a relationship that can also be abused, and sometimes in ways that may not be immediately apparent. Veterinarians should not act as technicians responding to the wishes of their clients; clients should not make demands that are not in the best health interest of their horses. Even in the most difficult situations, the potential exists to pursue options that can improve the quality of life and health for everyone, especially the horse.

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