

This Old Horse: Euthanasia Policy

Euthanasia: The Most Difficult Decision

The decision to euthanize, or induce a painless death, should never be made without careful consideration. The right choice is clearly the one that is in the best interest of the horse.

CONSIDER THE SITUATION

There is a wide range of circumstances under which euthanasia is a reasonable and responsible choice. Among the most common are these:

- Incurable, progressive disease
- Incurable, transmissible disease
- Chronic severe lameness
- Inoperable colic
- Foals born with serious defects
- Debilitation in old age
- Severe traumatic injury
- Dangerous behavioral traits
- Undue financial burden of caring for a sick or incapacitated horse
- Undue suffering for any reason

Every case is unique. Even in similar situations, the decision to euthanize an animal is highly individual. For example, in the case of a severe traumatic injury, such as a broken leg, the animal's psychological makeup can influence the outcome. Some horses may respond better to treatment than others; some are more cooperative than others, and some have a higher pain tolerance than others.

Euthanasia is often a highly emotional issue. Yet it is important to address the situation from a practical standpoint as well. Whether we are dealing with an emergency or a long-term illness, we will discuss the following questions with our veterinarian to help decide what is right for the horse:

- What is the likelihood of recovery or at least a return to pasture soundness or some level of usefulness?
- Is the horse suffering?
- How long will the horse experience the current level of pain or debility?
- Does the horse continue to show an interest and desire to live, or has it become depressed or despondent?
- What kind of special care will the horse require, and can you meet its needs?
- Can we continue to provide for the horse financially?
- What are the alternatives?

GUIDELINES

The following are guidelines to assist in making humane decisions regarding euthanasia of horses:

- A horse should not have to endure continuous or unmanageable pain from a condition that is chronic and incurable.
- A horse should not have to endure a medical or surgical condition that has a hopeless chance of survival.
- A horse should not have to remain alive if it has an unmanageable medical condition that renders it a hazard to itself or its handlers.
- A horse should not have to receive continuous analgesic medication for the relief of pain for the rest of its life.
- A horse should not have to endure a lifetime of continuous individual box stall confinement for prevention or relief of unmanageable pain or suffering.

Justification of euthanasia for humane reasons will be based on medical grounds, rather than economic considerations.

THE VETERINARIAN'S ROLE

As the horse's owner, we ultimately have the responsibility for determining the horse's fate. The veterinarian can provide us with medical information and help us fully understand the implications for the horse's future. The veterinarian can also explain the options, and offer comfort and support. But the veterinarian **cannot** make the decision for us. If we are in doubt about the prognosis or the options, we will get a second opinion. It is important for peace of mind that we feel sure we are making the right decision.

In extreme emergencies, a veterinarian may assume the responsibility for this decision, acting on an animal's behalf without an owner's consent. An example of such a situation is a horse that gets loose on a roadway and is struck by a car and severely injured. In this situation, the attending veterinarian may decide to euthanize the horse immediately to end its suffering. But such cases are rare.

Equine practitioners are frequently asked, "What would *you* do in this situation?" This question puts the veterinarian in a difficult position. No matter how compassionate and caring, the veterinarian is not as attached to the horse as we are, nor will he/she have to assume the emotional or financial responsibility of caring for the horse. Some veterinarians will feel comfortable answering such a question; others will not.

Remember, too, that a veterinarian must follow his or her conscience. A veterinarian may refuse to euthanize an animal if euthanasia seems unnecessary or unjustified. Or the veterinarian may choose to discontinue treatment if an owner is inhumanely allowing an animal to suffer or is unduly prolonging its death.

PLANNING & PREPARATION

If we and the veterinarian agree that euthanasia is the best choice, it is important to prepare as best we can. If we are able to make the decision in advance rather than in an emergency

situation, making prior arrangements will ease the process. These guidelines are:

- Decide when and where the procedure will be best carried out, bearing in mind that arrangements must be made for removal of the body. We will choose what is most comfortable and practical for us, the veterinarian, and the horse.
- Be aware that, for safety reasons, the veterinarian may not allow us to be touching or holding the horse during the procedure. We will, however, be able to touch and be with the horse afterward.
- Whenever possible, we will make arrangements *in advance* for the prompt removal and disposal of the body. Removal to a rendering facility will be required.
- Explain to our stakeholders in sensitive but honest terms, why the decision was made to euthanize the horse.
- Allow ourselves to grieve.

A PEACEFUL END

As caring owners, we want the horse to have a peaceful, painless end. Most commonly, euthanasia is achieved by injecting a barbiturate anesthetic in a dose sufficient to shut down the horse's central nervous system. The drug renders the horse unconscious, the horse's heart stops, and the horse quits breathing. These drugs act quickly and effectively.

Whenever possible, we will be present when the lethal injection is given, not all horses respond in exactly the same way. Most horses simply drop and lay still, maybe taking one or two deep breaths before expiring. Some horses continue to take occasional breaths for a minute or so, and there may also be some movement of the limbs, even though the horse is deeply unconscious and may no longer have a heartbeat. Seeing these apparent signs of life can be upsetting for some. But remember that they do not indicate that the horse is conscious or has any sense of feeling; they are simply involuntary reflexes by the body in its final moments.

COPING WITH EMOTIONS

Given the affection we have for our horses, dealing with their deaths can be extremely difficult. But dealing with your emotions honestly and going through the grieving process is important for your emotional well-being.

THINKING AHEAD

Death is an inevitable part of life. The horse, like all living creatures, will not live forever. Ideally, the horse will remain healthy and happy into old age and will die a peaceful, natural death. By thinking about what you would do in an emergency, or how you would act if the horse were to develop a painful or debilitating condition from which recovery was unlikely, you can be prepared for whatever happens.

LeRoy Job (pronounced Jobe) of Clear Lake, MN handles disposal of our horses who have died or been euthanized. Phone 612/ 245- 6085