



# Euthanasia

## Guidance for a Difficult Decision

Difficult though it may be to contemplate, there may come a time when, for humane or other reasons, you need to consider euthanasia for your horse. Choosing whether, or when, to end a beloved animal's life may be the hardest decision you ever have to make regarding your horse's welfare. However, it may be one of the most responsible and compassionate things we can do for our horses.

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 co-operative 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 you are dealing with an emergency or a long-term illness, discuss the following questions with your veterinarian to help you decide what is right for your 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 you continue to provide for the horse financially?
- What are your alternatives?

## **AAEP GUIDELINES**

The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) has developed euthanasia guidelines to help your veterinarian assist you during this very difficult time. The AAEP's standards apply to all horses, regardless of their monetary value, and are designed to avoid or terminate incurable and excessive suffering. Included in the guidelines are the following test statements:

- Is the condition chronic or incurable?
- Does the immediate condition suggest a hopeless prognosis for life?
- Is the horse a hazard to himself or his handlers?
- Will the horse require continuous medication for the relief of pain for the remainder of its life?

## **THE VETERINARIAN'S ROLE**

As the horse's owner, you ultimately have the responsibility for determining your horse's fate. Your veterinarian can provide you with medical information and help you fully understand the implications for the horse's future. Your veterinarian can also explain the options, and offer comfort and support. But your veterinarian *cannot* make the decision for you. If you are in doubt about the prognosis or your options, get a second opinion. It is important for your peace of mind that you feel sure you 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, your veterinarian is not as attached to the horse as you are, nor will s/he 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 you and your veterinarian agree that euthanasia is the best choice, it is important to prepare as best you can. If you are able to make the decision in advance rather than in an emergency situation, making prior arrangements will ease the process. These guidelines might help:

- Decide when and where the procedure will be best carried out, bearing in mind that arrangements must be made for removal of the body. Choose what is most comfortable and practical for you, your veterinarian, and your horse.
- If you board your horse, inform the stable manager of the situation.
- Decide whether you wish to be present during the procedure. If you cannot or do not wish to be present, you may want to ask a friend to stand in for you. Decide what is right for you. (If you are unfamiliar with the procedure and are unsure what to expect, discuss it with your veterinarian.)
- Be aware that, for safety reasons, your veterinarian may not allow you to be touching or holding the horse during the procedure. You will, however, be able to touch and be with your horse afterward.
- Make arrangements *in advance* for the prompt removal and disposal of the body. Check with your veterinarian and/or the city or county health department. Many municipalities have ordinances prohibiting or restricting burial. Removal to a rendering facility or pet crematory may be required.
- Explain to members of your family, especially children, in sensitive but honest terms, why the decision was made to euthanize the horse.
- Allow yourself to grieve. Finding a support person to talk with can help you work through this difficult period (see below).
- If the horse is insured, notify the insurance company in advance so that there are no problems with claims. While the veterinarian will provide you with any required documentation, the rest (notification, filing, follow-up, etc.) is your responsibility.

One note about terminology: "Put down" and "put to sleep" are terms for euthanasia commonly used by horse owners, and even by veterinarians when talking with horse owners. However, it is important to realize that these terms can mean different things to different people. For example, "put to sleep" may also mean to induce general anesthesia (render the horse unconscious for a surgical procedure from which the horse will recover, or wake up). Be sure your meaning is clear whenever you use these terms.

## **A PEACEFUL END**

As a caring owner, you want your 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.

If you plan to be present when the lethal injection is given, keep in mind that 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 heart beat. Seeing these apparent signs of life can be upsetting for some owners. 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.

Some veterinarians prefer to use a gun or captive-bolt pistol to perform euthanasia. Many owners recoil at the idea of this method of euthanasia because of the perception of violence often associated with the use of guns. However, when properly carried out, this method of euthanasia is instantaneous and is as humane as lethal injection.

## **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.

To help you deal with your grief, there are local and national counseling organizations, such as the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine's Pet Loss Support Hotline, (530) 752-4200. Your veterinarian may also know of resources in your area that can help you, so don't be afraid to ask.

## **INSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS**

If your horse is insured, become familiar with the regulations concerning your policy—including the fine print—before you act. Most insurance carriers require that they be kept fully informed from the beginning about a horse's medical condition, especially if death or euthanasia is a potential outcome. Even in an emergency, a reasonable attempt should be made to notify the insurance company. This notification is the owner's responsibility. If the animal can be stabilized, many policies require a second opinion before a horse is euthanized. However, under extreme circumstances, it is always up to the discretion of the owner and the veterinarian to act in the best interest of the horse. By being aware of your

policy's guidelines, you can minimize any unpleasant surprises which relate to your claim.

## **THINKING AHEAD**

Death is an inevitable part of life. Your horse, like all living creatures, will not live forever. Ideally, your horse will remain healthy and happy into old age and will die a peaceful, natural death. However, it is wise to give some thought to other possibilities.

By thinking about what you would do in an emergency, or how you would act if your horse were to develop a painful or debilitating condition from which recovery was unlikely, you can be prepared for whatever happens. Be sure to share your thoughts and wishes on this issue with others, especially those who may be caring for your horse in your absence, such as your barn manager or neighbor, and your veterinarian. Doing so may spare your horse needless suffering if a severe illness or injury were to occur when you were not able to be contacted.