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Euthanasia The ultimate act of kindness to your horse?

Winter is unfortunately the time of year when owners with chronically diseased horses have to contemplate whether or not it is kinder to have their horses put to sleep. In this article, Erik Belloy, partner at The Horse Clinic, will discuss the difficult decision making process, as well as the practicalities of considering euthanasia. Whilst it can be extremely upsetting to have to let go of a long term partnership, it can be an extreme act of kindness to have your horse euthanased if it is suffering.

The Decision

Making the decision to have your horse euthanased is extremely difficult for anyone. The process is not always helped by lots of well meaning friends and other horse owners giving you their opinion on the merits or otherwise. Every horse owner ultimately has to make up their own mind as to whether their horse is suffering too much, and whether they can cope with the extra care and attention needed for some diseased animals. It is a very individual decision and many owners will come to different conclusions for different animals at different times. If there is any suspicion that your horse may be suffering, it is vital that you get your vet involved in the decision making process. Some owners would be inclined to put horses down much sooner than others. Some owners are prepared to give their horse a long term retirement as a pet, whereas others are not in the financial position or are not emotionally inclined to do so. I frequently encounter owners with horses that are slightly lame, and therefore no longer useful to them. Whilst some owners would consider it kinder to put some of these horses to sleep, others are prepared to give them light exercise or rest them for as long as is needed in order to make their condition as comfortable as possible. It is imperative that owner's who decide to keep their lame animals, are seeking regular veterinary advice

about providing the right level of treatment for each individual horse. For some this may be regular administration of pain killers, whereas for others it may be much more appropriate to get pain killing injections carried out on regular basis by their vet. Many people would like to be able to find a companion home for their lame horse. Unfortunately, not many companion homes can be found for horses that can no longer be used. If it is impossible to find such a home, and if an owner is not able or prepared to continue looking after an animal, euthanasia may be more kind than to pass the horse from pillar to post.

Sometimes, acute diseases such as severe colic necessitate a quick and urgent decision to put a horse to sleep. It is probably better for owners to consider what levels of pain and what levels of intensity of treatment they find acceptable for their horses before the time has come where such a decision has to be made in haste. It may for example, be very appropriate for a 15 year old horse to undergo colic surgery if there is a good chance of giving it a full life after this traumatic event. On the other hand, if that same horse was 30 years old, the expense and trauma of this treatment may be deemed too much to embark upon. If the 30 year old horse is suffering from a colic which can only be corrected with more intensive management, it is wise for the owner to have considered before this event what they would do in such a situation. Sometimes, horses are kept alive for longer than is strictly necessary whilst they are suffering from condition that is unlikely to ever recover.

The process of Euthanasia

Horses can be put to sleep in two ways. The options are shooting, or injecting with a lethal dose of anaesthetic. Both methods are probably equally as good for the horse, but most horse owners now opt for euthanasia by lethal injection because it is not deemed such a violent act. Many veterinary surgeons would probably now prefer to put horses to sleep by lethal injection. Vets are not currently allowed by the police to carry around firearms, unless they have specifically taken them out of the surgery to a horse that ends up

being put down. Thus, the law has made it more difficult for the gun to be freely available for euthanasia in emergency situations. When a horse is shot, the bullet will destroy a large part of the brain and the brain stem very quickly, and as such, the horse may still be showing signs of life for some time after, but all pain and sensation is killed instantaneously. With the lethal injection, horses are administered an overdose of anaesthetic. The horse will usually be sedated to make the procedure more tolerable and smooth for the horse. With an overdose of anaesthetic the horse's senses will become extinguished over about 30 seconds to 1 minute. This is not likely to be an unpleasant situation for the horse, because it is very similar to going under anaesthetic for an operation. Like humans, there is a gradual increase of wooziness until the horse goes to ground. By the time the horse has gone to ground, it is not aware of any of its surroundings and is completely peaceful. Your vet is likely to use a catheter (plastic needle) so that access to the vein remains possible until all signs of life have disappeared. This allows topping up of the anaesthetic agent as well as preventing penetration of the vein and injection into the surrounding tissues.

Afterwards

When a horse has been put down, the owner is faced with the difficult decision as to what to do with the body. It is nowadays not usually possible to have the horse buried in the ground unless prior permission has been sought from the local authority. Therefore, the carcass will have to be removed by a Slaughterman or a cremation service. Horses that have not had any drugs administered could be taken away for feeding zoo animals or hunt kennels. Many horses will however have been treated with drugs prior to euthanasia, or euthanasia drugs may have been used to put them to sleep. In these cases the horse will have to be incinerated or cremated. When horses are cremated, the owner may wish to have some of the

ashes back, or all of the ashes back. The return of ashes can be a great memento of a companion. The costs of removing the body will of course increase substantially if owners wish to have ashes returned to them.

Another practicality that has to be borne in mind after euthanasia of a horse is that the passport should be returned within 14 days to the passport agency that issued it. At this stage, it is also worth remembering that each modern passport of a horse does include a section where the owner declares whether or not they wish their horse to go for human consumption at any point in its life. It is a legal requirement for an owner to record all medication that is ever given to a horse when the horse was not opted out of the food chain. By signing that your horse has been opted out of the food chain, it allows your vet to use many drugs that are unavailable to horses that may later enter the food chain. These drugs can be life savers as well as prevent lots of suffering. Where possible, make sure that your vet can have access to the passport at the premises where the horse is kept.

Even later

Once the horse has been put down and taken away, it is very common for many owners to experience severe grief. Sometimes this grief is not fully understood by relatives, or even other horse owners. It is easy for people to say that they would have their horse destroyed under certain circumstances, but when they are actually facing the decision themselves with their own horse that they have loved and cared for, this decision may become a lot more difficult.

Make sure you discuss with your vet if you feel extremely affected by these issues. Your vet may have contacts and trained staff who can help you to deal with the sudden loss that you have experienced.



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