

From Veterinarian to Ethics Advisor: A Real Challenge for Equine Veterinarians

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving role of equine veterinarians in response to changing societal expectations surrounding animal welfare and dignity. Veterinarians are now expected to go beyond disease treatment and consider the natural needs, welfare and ethical concerns of equines in their care (1). This includes assessing constraints on animals and balancing the interests of both humans and horses. EQUI-SCOPE (www.equi-scope.ch) advocates for a stronger focus on ethology and ethics in both initial and ongoing veterinary education to better equip veterinarians in their role as advisors on animal welfare. This paper also discusses how Swiss legislation allows for the imposition of constraints on animals, provided these

are justified by greater human interests, and within a framework that safeguards the dignity of animals.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird die sich verändernde Rolle von Pferdeärzten als Reaktion auf die sich wandelnden gesellschaftlichen Erwartungen in Bezug auf das Wohlergehen und die Würde der Tiere untersucht. Von Tierärzten wird heute erwartet, dass sie über die Behandlung von Krankheiten hinausgehen und die natürlichen Bedürfnisse, das Wohlergehen und die ethischen Belange von Pferden bei ihrer Pflege berücksichtigen (1). Dazu gehört auch die Bewertung von Einschränkungen für die Tiere und die Abwägung der

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Interessen von Mensch und Pferd. EQUI-SCOPE (www.equi-scope.ch) setzt sich für eine stärkere Fokussierung auf Ethologie und Ethik in der veterinärmedizinischen Aus- und Weiterbildung ein, um Tierärztinnen und Tierärzte in ihrer Rolle als Berater für das Wohlergehen der Tiere besser auszustatten. In diesem Beitrag wird auch erörtert, wie die schweizerische Gesetzgebung die Auferlegung von Beschränkungen für Tiere zulässt, sofern diese durch übergeordnete menschliche Interessen gerechtfertigt sind und innerhalb eines Rahmens, der die Würde der Tiere schützt.

A Paradigm Shift

Equids, once utilitarian and vile symbols, now fulfil mostly recreational or sporting functions in Western regions and have conquered other environments, often young, female, and urban. At the same time, societal demands for animal welfare are growing and challenging many practices. Critics mainly denounce animal suffering as a direct result of their use. Two approaches to solving this dilemma are in conflict with one another. On one side is the ethics of responsibility, largely in the majority, which aims to protect animals but does not oppose their use. This pragmatic and reasoned school of thought accepts the asymmetry of relationships between humans and equids that stems from the irreversible status of domestic animals acquired over millennia. On the other side, there is the ethics of conviction that rejects the idea of a gap between species and advocates anti-speciesism and the general abolition of animal use.

and life sciences – for example, bioethics – EQUI-SCOPE defends the right to use equids if certain conditions are met (2). It thus supports the ethical principle of personal responsibility towards them and reciprocity: if we ask a lot of them, we must give back enormously in return. It relies on research from various disciplines and favours fair relationships between humans and equids. This reasoned approach examines the interests of these two parties from a moral standpoint, the intensity and extent of their needs, as well as the nature, causes, and justification of constraints. It therefore consists of systematically deliberating to determine what should be done to act well and justly in the present. Through a deeper understanding, it develops the ability to question current or proposed practices and search for appropriate responses within a given context.

Legislative Framework

Since 1992, the Swiss Constitution (Art. 120) has respected the integrity of living organisms and the safety of humans, animals, and the environment, and protects the genetic diversity of animal and plant species. The Animal Welfare Act (AniWA) specifies the notions that describe human perceptions and concepts, particularly those of dignity, intrinsic value (animal dignity), constraint, degradation, profound impact, or instrumentalisation. However, the legislation and accompanying texts do not guarantee animal dignity in an absolute manner. Humans can therefore subject animals to constraints, but these must be justified by overriding interests. This legitimation occurs within the framework of weighing the interests of each party (animals and humans) from a moral standpoint.



Image 1: An aged and sick horse. In the absence of a diagnosis, Equine Cushing's disease is suspected. (Source: ©PxHere, CC0 Public Domain)

Based on the evolution of sensitivity levels in society and on social

The Risks of Anthropomorphism

With the shift of equids towards the status of companion animals, there is a rise in empathetic concerns. Many people imagine that they feel the emotions of these animals; they rely on their own experiences and let their emotions take over. However, the well-being of an equine depends essentially on its adaptability, that is, how it perceives the environment in which it lives and the effort it must make to adapt to it. Humans cannot use an assessment of equine well-being based on what they think is correct from a human perspective to ensure good living conditions. Instead of examining the circumstances from the horse's perspective including its fundamental needs (freedom of movement, coarse forage, social interactions with peers, safety, shelter, enriched and stimulating environment, proper physical condition, good health, etc.), they impose their own feelings on the animal ("I feel cold at 15 degrees and put on a sweater, therefore I must blanket the horse at this temperature as well otherwise it will be cold.") Impulses of pity, despite originating from good intentions, are inadequate.

This gap in how to appreciate and assess the state of animal well-being is among the difficulties to overcome in debates on the various situations that can be encountered. These problems can be addressed through training of the equestrian population and the assistance of veterinarians, particularly by teaching stakeholders not to impose their feelings upon the horse, but rather to understand the animal's perspective.

Veterinarians also Encounter Problems

The profession of veterinary medicine plays a crucial role in ensuring and improving equine welfare. The study and training program is undoubtedly well-designed to convey the cardinal values of the profession, supported by several social qualities (listening to the client, responsiveness, reliability, taking responsibility, transparency, etc.). However, even though veterinary education addresses animal ethics, many equine veterinarians subsequently face difficulties in practically conducting a nuanced and honest weighing of interests. The main obstacle is evaluating the natural needs of equids as well as the impacts on their dignity and well-being. Moreover, their relationships with horses can be marked, like those of owners, by notions of use, control, and submission, especially when the equine's value is primarily noted in monetary terms.

By emphasising a human vision of well-being, some veterinarians struggle to recognize equids as subjects of their own existence that seek to satisfy intrinsic needs. By giving too much weight to the goals they themselves have defined, such as pain elimination, these same veterinarians overlook the animal's perspective, in other words, its way of perceiving its environment. During care, they do not always correctly identify behavioural signs of discomfort or pain. This leads them, for example, to be unable to provide appropriate recommendations or to delay the appropriate time for euthanasia. Clearly, some equine veterinarians have not yet grasped the practical implications of

the gradual shift from anthropocentrism to a biocentric approach that grants equids an intrinsic value to be respected.

A Challenge for Equine Medicine

Recently, several signs suggest that the sustainability of the equine sector depends on how the population perceives the well-being of equids, especially when activities or disciplines come under fire. Today, only ethologists and a few veterinarians who have developed strong skills in equine ethology are in a position to provide their expertise and advice in the field of ethics, particularly during a weighing of interests. However, in the future, daily practice will require therapists (veterinarians, osteopaths, physiotherapists etc.) and other actors in the equine sector to take personal responsibility for mastering key concepts such as dignity, well-being, and constraints, whether justified or not. This knowledge will help them take ethical principles into account and focus on an interspecific and harmonious relationship that includes the needs of both equids and humans.

Major Topics

In summary, the knowledge that needs to be developed serves to master the processes that cause, reduce, or avoid unjustified constraints affecting the dignity of equids and harming their well-being (pain, ailments, harm, anxiety, degradation, profound modification of abilities or phenotype, excessive instrumentalisation). This requires an objective understanding of the biological, physical, biomechanical, behavioural, and adaptive functions and capacities specific to the equine species.

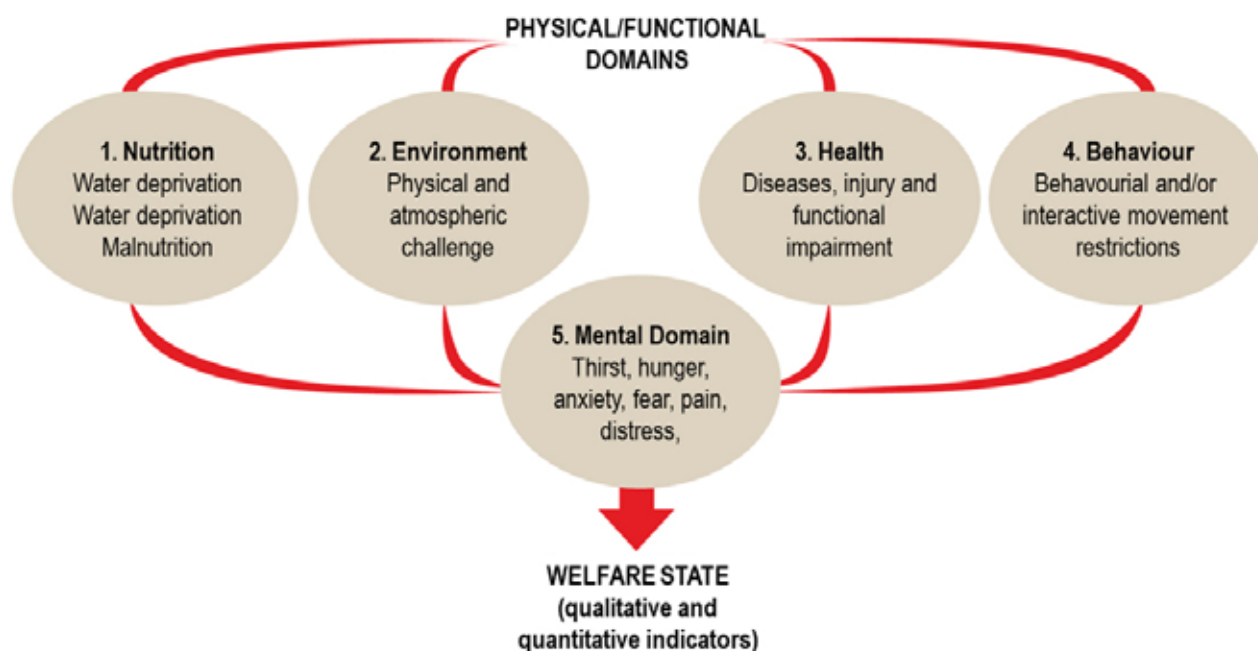


Image 2: The multidimensional nature of the systemic approach in assessing and advising on the state of well-being (according to Poncet et al., 2022, Figure 5)

The Animal Welfare Act (AniWA) characterizes the well-being of animals. This is defined as a state in which an individual does not experience negative sensations or lasting dissatisfaction of its natural needs. More specifically, the conditions of its detention and its diet do not disturb its bodily functions and behaviours. They also do not excessively challenge its adaptive capacity. Thus, within the limits of the latter, the equine retains the ability to behave in accordance with its species' ethogram (4). It remains clinically healthy, and humans spare it from unjustified and unnecessary constraints. Furthermore, the proper attitude is to consider equids as sentient beings, aware of their environment and capable of feeling pain and experiencing emotions (pleasure, joy, fear, and pain).

The assessment of animal welfare is based on a pluralistic and interdisciplinary view: positive

emotions, good physical and mental health, correct biological functioning, and species-appropriate behaviour. It therefore goes well beyond the general concept of animal protection: good clinical health and adequate care (sufficient food, appropriate housing, absence of mistreatment).

Recent Scientific Advances

Several recent scientific publications focus on identifying constraints and practices that worsen the well-being or affect the dignity of equids. This corpus forms the basis for analysing certain ethical questions. EQUI-SCOPE has listed a large number of these in its "Ethical Reflections on the Dignity and Welfare of Horses and Other Equids: Pathways to Enhanced Protection" (2). These publications address the fields of ethology, medicine and biology, breeding, equestrian sciences, as well as human and social sciences.

This knowledge and reflection are essential for carrying out the weighing of interests that must accompany any interaction between humans and horses and when deciding whether a constraint is acceptable, whether we should seek to reduce it by modifying certain practices, or whether it should be considered unacceptable.

Conclusions

What concerns EQUI-SCOPE today is understanding how certain socially or professionally credible individuals can defend erroneous opinions on ethics by bringing forth seemingly excellent reasons (e.g. guaranteeing animal welfare by abusing anti-inflammatory drugs or restricting free movement under the pretext of minimising the risk of injury). These misconceptions can stem from the intrinsic complexity of observed situations, the weight of tradition, or an imperfect mastery of

scientific knowledge that leads to overestimating, underestimating, or misinterpreting certain behavioural traits.

The first measure that EQUI-SCOPE proposes is to extend the initial and continuing education of veterinarians who regularly treat equids. The objective would include a contemporary approach to the notion of well-being centred on a true ethical consideration of the intrinsic needs of equids. To this end, the time devoted to animal ethics could be increased in initial training, and professional organisations should complement the improved curriculum with continuing education focused on the topics discussed above.

Finally, to respond to the challenges of an equestrian culture in transition, and often disconcerted, EQUI-SCOPE also supports the opinion that research should increase the importance given to projects in ethology, equine, and social sciences. For this, close collaboration with other actors in the equine industry is essential. Finally, a broad transmission of this knowledge is unavoidable, and veterinarians can, through their own professional activity, contribute decisively to it.

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Image 3: An example of hereditary diseases in equids is Hyperkalemic Periodic Paralysis (HYPP). The conformation of affected horses is characterised by muscle hypertrophy and they are subject to unpredictable episodes of weakness and severe muscle spasms that can result in any use of these animals being impossible. (Source: murphy2136, screenshot, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZGYxiNOynM>)