

A review of ethical factors impacting the role of equine veterinarians in practice and the process of weighing interests in decision-making

Montavon Stéphane, Poncet Pierre-André and Trolliet Charles

Equi-Scope, Schweizer Plattform der Pferdebranche, Prez-vers-Noréaz, Switzerland

Summary: The role of equine veterinarians, particularly those working with sport horses, is influenced by a multitude of societal, ethical and scientific factors. This requires a nuanced approach, based on careful consideration of all interests. This weighing of interests provides an essential framework for decision-making that considers the biological and behavioural needs of horses, evolving social expectations, and the demands of modern veterinary medicine practices. Socio-cultural changes observed in recent decades have directly influenced the way in which horses are perceived and treated. While they were historically considered primarily as tools or instruments of performance, they are now recognised as sentient beings with specific natural needs that must be respected for moral and scientific reasons. This evolution is part of a society that has become more sensitive to animal welfare, requiring the role of equine veterinarians to be redefined. They are now expected to integrate strict ethical criteria into their practices alongside medical considerations. This social acceptance promotes the well-being of horses by taking into account their fundamental needs, such as social behaviour, freedom of movement, grazing, and expressing their natural behaviours. Meeting these needs is essential for preventing pathologies related to stress, restricted movement, or unsuitable living conditions, which can affect sport horses subjected to intense training or artificial environments. Prolonged confinement in stalls without sufficient access to the outdoors, for example, can lead to stereotypical behavioural disorders such as self-mutilation and rocking, which are signs of profound discomfort and a lack of well-being. The concept of animal dignity plays a central role in considering interests in veterinary practice. This involves preserving the physical and psychological integrity of the horse by avoiding not only pain or suffering, but also any form of undue coercion, humiliation or excessive exploitation. Coercion can manifest in training or competition practices that prioritise performance over respect for animal health and welfare. Humiliation manifests itself in invasive protocols or treatments of questionable therapeutic efficacy and calls into question the very notion of the horse's dignity as an individual. Excessive exploitation reduces the horse to a mere performance machine and raises major ethical questions about its place in a society that recognises its status as a sentient being. Therefore, decision-making by equine veterinarians must be based on a rigorous analysis of interests, taking into account immediate medical benefits, long-term welfare implications and societal expectations. This is a complex process as it requires avoiding the trap of anthropomorphism — i.e. not attributing human emotions or motivations to horses unduly, which could bias the objective assessment of their real needs. Certain practices that were once accepted are now considered unacceptable in the context of equine welfare. These include unnecessary suffering, training methods based on physical or psychological coercion, and living conditions that do not allow for the expression of natural behaviours. Equine veterinarians face multiple and often conflicting challenges. They must balance the performance demands of sport horse owners and trainers, the medical imperatives of care and prevention, and heightened social expectations regarding animal welfare and ethics. These professionals are under considerable pressure, torn between the need to provide specialised care and the need to comply with shifting ethical standards that are often the subject of debate. They must always base their medical and ethical decisions on a careful and balanced analysis of the interests at stake, without ever succumbing to the temptation to oversimplify or mechanically apply standardised protocols. They must also undergo continuous training in behavioural and ethical matters to adapt their practices to scientific advances and societal expectations. The evolving role of equine veterinarians in the management of sports horses reflects a significant shift in the relationship between humans and animals. Weighing up interests is an essential methodological and ethical tool for ensuring appropriate decision-making that respects the biological and behavioural complexity of horses, while also meeting the demands of a changing society. Any form of excessive anthropomorphism, undue coercion, humiliation or exploitation that undermines the dignity of horses must be rejected. Equine veterinarians are at a crossroads, and must meet these challenges with discernment, courage, and professionalism without being stigmatised for the tensions inherent in their role.

Keywords: equine practice, ethical factors, social license to operate, weighing of interests, decision making

Citation: Montavon S, Poncet P-A, Trolliet C (2025) A review of ethical factors impacting the role of equine veterinarians in practice and the process of weighing interests in decision making. *Comp Pferdehlk* 2, 12–20, doi.org/10.21836Compendium20260102

Correspondence: Stéphane Montavon, DVM, Vice-president of Equi-Scope. Les Riaux 16, 1746 Prez-vers-Noréaz, Switzerland, smontavon@bluewin.ch

submitted on November 7, 2025 – accepted on December 6, 2025.....

Introduction

The purpose of this communication is to examine the evolving role of the equine practitioner in response to changing societal expectations of animal welfare and dignity. Veterinarians are now expected to go beyond treating diseases and consider the natural needs, welfare, and ethical concerns of the horse in their care ^[1].

This includes assessing the constraints on the animal and balancing the interests of both human and horse.

The position of animals in society in general, and of horses in particular, has changed significantly around the world over the last decades. Today, horses are considered more and more to be creatures with dignity, an intrinsic value and natural needs that

must be respected in their own way. On the other hand, domesticated species such as horses are bred and kept to fulfill needs of man in leisure and sport, or as livestock. Various practices, widely accepted and common among trainers, owners, keepers and users of horses up until recently, are now considered an abuse of, or even a cruelty to horses. What was once regarded as traditional knowledge and state of the art might now be an unacceptable constraint, actively discussed in the media. By the same token, today's society often displays a highly complex attitude to the death of horses. While in some circles the end of a horse's life is seen as the normal end of a production cycle, others have great difficulty in saying goodbye. This is particularly true if the equid is no longer useful in the strict sense of the term, for example when it can no longer be ridden. Consequences of changing views and diverging opinions in societies can be observed daily. They may vary from a general denial of any progress or of current laws, to complete humanization of horses. Some may complain about the loss of common sense, while others call for unreachable ideals. One can observe anthropocentric behaviour at one end of the scale, and on the other, an excessive tendency to treat animals as if they were humans. Changes in customs and moral standards can thus lead to a serious dilemma. Knowing that legal provisions are not necessarily moral and that they evolve alongside the evolution of society's moral standards, should one merely enforce the law on the grounds that what is not prohibited is implicitly allowed? Or, on the contrary, should one look beyond the issue of legality and ask oneself the ethical question of how to adjust one's behaviour and what one should or should not do in the interests of ensuring right or preventing wrong, always remaining mindful of the consequences of the decision for all parties concerned, including the horse? Is it worse to fail to do what one should than to do what one should not? Ethics are not a collection of moral principles designed to achieve ideal and perfect harmony. They evolve with time and vary according to the sensitivity of the milieu concerned. However, it is a matter of the responsibility and honor of each individual to challenge his or her own practices and to decide, accordingly, whether they are right or wrong. As the notion of ethics and the horse has taken on great significance in our society, many horse welfare organizations have taken up the debate on the issue. Having identified the need for information and communication, a number of interdisciplinary working groups have been set up. They are all charged with taking stock of the situation, particularly with a view to the future, and analyzing the ethical issues involved. Recognizing the intrinsic value of an animal means respecting it for what it is¹⁻²⁾. To this end, the FEI established the Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission (EEWC) in 2022. A valuable final report and action plan were published in 2024³⁾.

Review of the issues

There has been a paradigm shift

Equids, once utilitarian and masculine symbols, are now mostly used for recreation or sport in western regions and have moved into other environments, often young, female and urban. At the same time, societal demands for animal welfare are growing and challenging many practices. In particular, critics denounce the suffering of animals as a direct result of their use. There are two opposing approaches to this dilemma. On the one hand, there is "the ethics of responsibility", which is largely in the majority and aims to protect animals but does not oppose their use. This prag-



Fig 1 – An aged and sick horse. In the absence of a diagnosis, PPID is suspected. (Source: Pxere, CCO Public Domain)

Abb 1 – Ein altes und krankes Pferd. Da keine Diagnose vorliegt, wird PPID vermutet. (Quelle: Pxere, CCO Public Domain)

matic and rational school of thought accepts the asymmetry in the relationship between humans and equids due to the irreversible status of domestic animals acquired over thousands of years. On the other hand, there is "the ethics of conviction", which rejects the idea of a gap between species and advocates anti-speciesism and the general abolition of the use of animals.

Based on the evolution of sensitivity in society and on social and life sciences such as bioethics, the equine veterinary community, in addition to the equestrian community, must defend the right to use equids as long as certain conditions are met¹⁾. It thus supports "the ethical principles of personal responsibility" towards equids and reciprocity: if we ask a lot of them, we must give a lot back. This is based on research from various disciplines and favors a fair relationship between humans and equids. This reasoned approach examines the interests of both parties from a moral point of view, the intensity and extent of their needs, as well as the nature, causes and justification of constraints. It is therefore a systematic reflection on what should be done to act well and justly in the present. Through deeper understanding, it develops the ability to question current or proposed practices and to seek appropriate responses within a given context.

The situation with the SLO (social license to operate)

Historically, the term "social license to operate" originated in the mining industry in Anglo-Saxon countries. It refers to a tacit agreement between a company that takes advantage of resources and a community that accepts the terms and conditions⁴⁻⁶⁾.

In summary, this license is based on three elements:

- Legitimacy: acquired through the way in which an individual or an organization conforms to the rules, i.e., to collective, cultural, explicit or informal, or even legal norms.
- Credibility: this is demonstrated by the company's ability to provide truthful and transparent information and to meet commitments made.

- Trust: this is established when the firm and its actors show a propensity to expose themselves to the interventions and operations of third parties. This way of approaching and linking concepts will result in high quality outcomes but requires a lot of time and effort to establish.

Applied to the equestrian field, licensing takes the form of social consent to exercise and organize activities with horses. This acceptance is largely based on the way in which natural and legal persons involved in sports and recreation promote animal welfare and its perception by the public. Therefore, they not only seek to maintain equestrian activities, but also to strengthen it to ensure its future.

Threats to social license

The public approves an activity but can revoke this approval at any time if it feels that the physical and psychological well-being of animals is at risk. This is particularly the case if the issue is not high on an organization’s agenda, if humans have poor relationships with animal welfare or if some stakeholders are left out of the discussion. Difficulties also arise when practices and rules lack a solid foundation, or even evidence, or when organizations are not accountable, clear and ethical.

Public outrage is amplified by the media, especially social media. The dangers are well known: financial risks, pressure on federations, loss of reputation and trust, questioning of transparency, increased regulation, legal restrictions, forced change, boycott.



Fig 2 – The six priority areas of focus identified through factor analysis of equestrian survey results; 1 highest priority areas, followed by 2, 3 etc.) (according to Equine Ethics and wellbeing Commission FEI – Final report 2023 – Prof. Nat Waran)

Abb 2 – Die sechs Schwerpunktbereiche, die durch Faktorenanalyse der Ergebnisse einer Umfrage zum Pferdesport ermittelt wurden; 1 = Bereiche mit höchster Priorität, gefolgt von 2, 3 usw. (gemäß Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission FEI – Abschlussbericht 2023 – Prof. Nat Waran)

Considerations on ethics and well-being

Ethics are a practical and normative philosophical discipline determining, in a structured system, how human beings should behave in their interactions with each other and with their environment. Among other things, this involves challenging existing values and rules. The ethical approach thus consists of systematically investigating what one should do or how one should proceed in order for things to be considered right and proper ^[1]. Below are some important definitions.

Well-being – an animal’s well-being is guaranteed when it is

1. Kept and fed in such a way as to ensure that its bodily functions and characteristics are not compromised and its ability to adapt to different situations is not over-taxed,
2. Allowed to behave in accordance with the habits inherent to its species, within the limits of its biological adaptability,
3. Clinically healthy,
4. Spared pain, suffering, harm and fear.

The well-being of an animal is thus a state in which it is free of negative sensations and protracted significant need.

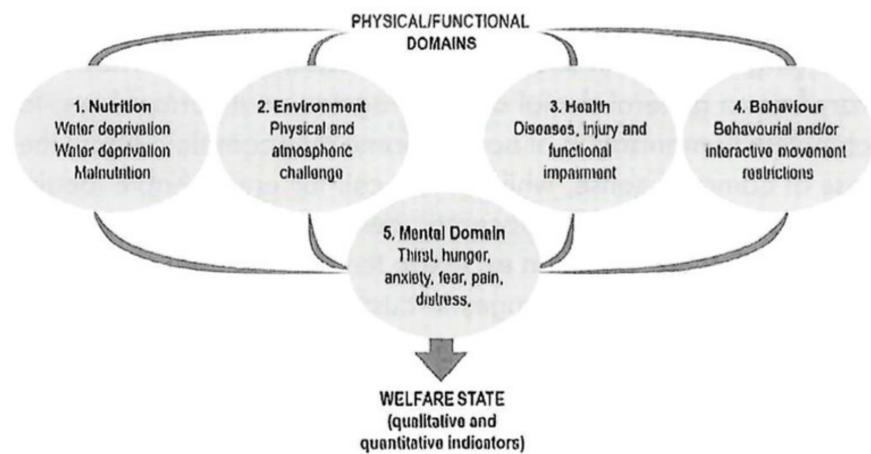


Fig 3 – The multidimensional nature of the systemic approach in assessing and advising on the state of well-being according to Mellor’s five domains (Poncet P.-A. et al. 2024).

Abb 3 – Die multidimensionale Natur des systemischen Ansatzes bei der Bewertung und Beratung zum Wohlbefinden gemäß den fünf Bereichen von Mellor (Poncet P.-A. et al. 2024).

The natural needs of a horse

The term “needs,” when applied to a living being, denotes a sensation or feeling. A “need” is the desire or wish to remedy a perceived or actual deprivation. The term “necessity,” on the other hand, signifies a concrete and quantifiable amount of something that is required by that living being to successfully develop, survive and reproduce.

Dignity

Many animals’ protection legislation defines dignity as a value that is intrinsic to an animal and must be respected in all interactions with it. An animal’s dignity is violated if it is subjected to a constraint that cannot be justified by overriding interests. The imposition of a constraint on an animal may take the form of inflicting pain, suffering or harm on it, subjecting it to fear or debasement, significantly interfering with its appearance or abilities, or subjecting it to excessive instrumentalization. All forms of constraint infringe upon an animal’s dignity. If the constraint can be justified by overriding interests, the dignity of the animal is respected. If the constraint cannot be justified by overriding interests, the dignity of the animal is violated.

Intrinsic value of an animal

Recognition of an animal’s intrinsic value means respecting it for its own sake and for what it is, i.e., for the characteristics, needs and behaviour specific to its type. In acknowledging an animal’s intrinsic value, we must respect it and give it moral consideration,

independently of our own feelings, attitudes and personal experience. An animal has its own intrinsic value irrespective of whether it also has an instrumental, market, sentimental or hereditary value.

Constraint

- The exercise of physical or mental force on an animal in order to achieve an advantage for man,
- The negative consequences of such behaviour for the animal,
- The use of violence in order to force an animal to do something against its will or to prevent it from doing what it wants to do.

In more concrete terms, the imposition of a constraint signifies one or more of the following:

- The infliction of pain, suffering or harm,
- Subjection to fear,
- Humiliation,
- Significant interference with an animal's appearance or abilities,
- Excessive instrumentalization.

The unjustified imposition of a constraint on an animal (injury, pain, stress, restriction of liberty, violation of dignity, etc.) is prohibited. An evaluation of the balance of interests is therefore required, whereby the constraint imposed on the animal (type, degree of seriousness, irrevocability) is weighed against the interests of the parties or entities concerned (the human, the animal, the environment). If the weight of the constraint imposed on the animal exceeds the weight of the interests of the parties concerned, the constraint is abusive; in other words, the animal's dignity is violated.

Humiliation

Humiliation means that animals are not seen for what they actually are and may take one of the following forms:

- Mechanization of an animal, considering it as nothing more than a machine;
- Subjection of an animal to ridicule;
- Portrayal of an animal as an inanimate object, objectification;
- Measures associated with a total loss of control.

Humiliation may be linked to the treatment of an individual animal or to an entire group, type or breed. Certain practices (e.g., a specific breeding goal) may affect both individuals and groups. The facts must be examined independently of whether or not the animal is aware of the debasement.

Significant interference with an animal's appearance

Something is considered to be significant interference with an animal's appearance when:

- the modification leads to a loss of function (thus also signifying significant interference with the animal's abilities),
- the action results in humiliation of the animal,
- the sense of aesthetics is violated (e.g., hairless dogs),
- the action has long-lasting or permanent consequences (docking of the ears or tail).



Fig 4 – Shaving of the vibrissae - an example of significant interference with an animal's abilities. (Source: Swiss National Stud)

Abb 4 – Rasieren der Tasthaare – ein Beispiel für eine erhebliche Beeinträchtigung der Fähigkeiten eines Tieres. (Quelle: Schweizerisches Nationalgestüt)

Excessive instrumentalization

Any measure that imposes a constraint and where the goal is to transform the animal into nothing more than a tool to be used by man, without taking its specific physical and mental needs into account. Every use of an animal comprises an element of instrumentalization but this is not called into question here.



Fig 5 – Excessive instrumentalisation? Humiliation? (Source: Swiss National Stud)

Abb 5 – Übermäßige Instrumentalisierung? Demütigung? (Quelle: Schweizerisches Nationalgestüt)

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 can 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 assess equine well-being based on what they think is correct from a human per-

spective to ensure good living conditions. Instead of examining 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 being well intended, 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 through the support of veterinarians, particularly by teaching stakeholders not to impose their feelings upon the horse, but rather how to understand the animal's perspective.

The process of weighing interests and decision-making

In many countries, animal protection legislation does not guarantee the dignity of animals in an absolute way. Humans can therefore subject them to constraint but overriding interests must justify them. This legitimization takes place within the framework of a weighing of interests. In short, the most morally significant values and interests are weighed against each other. These values do not only pertain to strain, but also the relevant interests. Therefore, not all interests are taken into account. A distinction is made between the most important benefits that morally justify strain, and those that do not; such as private interests in the sense of specific individual interests. Those interests that are retained in the decision-making process must bring a significant benefit to society as a whole in economic, social or ecological terms, or be considered a fundamental right as protected by many countries (economic freedom, freedom of ownership). Human interests cannot therefore be considered more important than those of animals by default.

The weighing of interests has a normative aspect that deals with the ethical question of how something should be, not how it is. It is a necessary element in order to be able to make provisions for cases where the legal requirements (minimum requirements) do not regulate all of the details (exceptions, events, uses). However, many equestrian federations or private organizations have also established a list of prohibited practices – strains that are considered unjustifiable and do not respect animal dignity (docking the tail, removing the whiskers, application of a tongue tie, rapping/poling, neck hyperflexion). In such cases, a subsequent weighing of interests is therefore superfluous.

As a matter of principle, the weighing of interests consists of a detailed assessment of the situation in question. In one case, an intervention may be strain-related, but not in another. Knowledge of biology (anatomy, ethology, physiology) plays a decisive role in identifying the effects of a particular strain on the ability of an individual to lead a species-specific life. This knowledge must also be accompanied by the necessary skills (expertise, ability, experience, aptitude, knowledge) to be able to decide on the moral point of view in each particular context of the caring for and use of equids by humans. These points require the continued development of consistent ethical frameworks.

The process of weighing the interests in a particular case consists of several steps of questioning and verification:

- How can the situation be accurately described: Proposed action (intervention, procedure, etc.), reasons, objectives, persons and animals concerned, circumstances, nature of strain, risks, legislation, observed trends?
- What scientific knowledge is required to assess the strain on the one hand and overriding interests on the other?
- What are the results of the stress assessment? What type and degree of severity of strain does the animal have to endure (pain, injury, harm, anxiety, debasement, profoundly phenotypic or ability-altering intervention or abilities, excessive instrumentalization)?
- Is the dignity of the animal and/or its welfare affected?
- Is the intervention irreplaceable in achieving the cited goal, or can the goal be achieved with another intervention that subjects the animal to less strain? However, the possible alternatives should not result in a disproportionate additional strain (time, money)
- What conclusions does the balancing of interests lead to? Are there overriding interests that justify the coercive practice? In short, the usefulness of an action is not sufficient to legitimize strain. The intervention must be strictly necessary and there must be no other means of achieving the objective.
- Have all the elements been gathered and assessed in such a way as to proceed in good faith and conscience to make a decision?

When considering the interests of equids, it is not appropriate to look at the situation too holistically. What is important is to consider the various individual animals. The advantages and disadvantages vary significantly depending on the breed, age, sex, conditions of care and use, and the dimensions of each animal's behavioural profile (sensitivity, reactivity, emotionality, gregariousness, musculoskeletal activity).

Finally, the result of a weighing of interests is not to make a judgement that represents a single, definitive truth. Another analysis, new scientific knowledge or a change in legislation may lead to a different conclusion.

The risks

A risk is defined as a subjective human perception of the probability that an individual (human or animal) or a group (organization, society) will suffer harm during the course of a given activity, of varying intensity, that may negatively affect its interests temporarily or permanently. This harm may be physical, psychological, social or economic in nature or affect the environment of the individual or group. In semantic terms, a distinction is made between the meaning of the word danger (accident) and that of the term harm (injury).

Risk assessment is an essential step in ethical questioning. In theory, the probability of harm occurring is inversely proportional to its intensity. In other words, the probability of serious harm occurring is low, while that of minor harm is high. Depending on the probability and intensity of the damage, the risk varies between negligible and catastrophic. Finally, the subjective perception of the level of risk is associated with an activity. It may vary from one individual to another, for example depending on their ability to anticipate a consequence or an event.

The threshold at which the risks is unacceptable

Animals are considered unfit to consent to a risk arising from an applied strain (children as well by analogy). It is therefore up to humans to define the threshold of acceptability. This threshold depends on a few parameters:

- The benefit that can reasonably be expected in relation to the risk of harm incurred and its intensity
- The possibility of repairing the damage (irreversibility of the damage)
- The level of knowledge and perception needed to assess the likelihood of a risk occurring (e.g. experience)
- The existence (or not) of a less harmful solution as an alternative to the risky activity
- The ability to mitigate risk through appropriate measures

The process of risk reduction includes important steps such as objectively identifying the risks and their causes (risk factors), taking into account the visibility of the proposed intervention and public or media perception, studying the means to limit the amount of risk, implementing risk reduction measures, identifying the objectives to be achieved and monitoring the results (reporting).

Discussion*Veterinarians can also struggle*

The profession of veterinary medicine plays a crucial role in ensuring and improving equine welfare. The study and training program worldwide 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, although 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 emphasizing 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 attributing 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 behavioral signs of discomfort or pain. This leads them, for example, to be unable to provide appropriate treatment 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. We could also mention the economic aspect, which can lead vets to make choices that do not respect the dignity and/or well-being of horses.

A challenge for equine medicine

Recently, several signs suggest that the sustainability of the equine sector depends on how the population perceives the wellbeing of equids, especially when specific activities or disciplines come un-

der 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 instrumentalization). This requires an objective understanding of the biological, physical, biomechanical, behavioral, and adaptive functions and capacities specific to the equine species.

In most countries with traditions involving horses and equestrian culture, animal protection laws define the well-being of animals, including specifically for horses. 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 behaviors. 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^[7-9]. 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^[7-9]. This corpus forms the basis for analyzing certain ethical questions. A large number of these are listed in the publication "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, if we should seek to reduce it by modifying certain practices, or if it should be considered unacceptable.

Raising awareness without attributing blame

In conclusion, it is clear that critical observers of the equestrian scene will – justifiably – continue to voice legitimate expectations of the horse industry. Given the recurrent criticism directed at equestrians and horse owners and the polemics surrounding certain practices, it is essential to ensure that the monitoring and supervisory role is not left exclusively to the animal protection organizations and law enforcement authorities. As noted, the responsibility for preventing problems from arising and for making regular and honest evaluations of the weighing of interests lies primarily with the people who work with horses and the organizations that represent them. It would therefore seem desirable that an independent permanent think tank commission dealing with the issue of ethics and the horse be set up within the equestrian industry, funded by the organizations and institutions concerned.



Fig 6 – Raising awareness without attributing blame
(Source: Swiss National Stud)

Abb 6 – Sensibilisierung ohne Schuldzuweisungen
(Quelle: Schweizerisches Nationalgestüt)

Conclusion

What concerns horse welfare specialists today is to understand 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 minimizing 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 behavioral traits. The first measure proposed 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 centered on a true ethical consideration of the intrinsic needs of equids. To this end, the time devoted to animal ethics could be increased during initial veterinary training, and professional organizations should complement the improved curriculum with continuing education fo-

cused on the topics discussed above. To respond to the challenges of an equestrian culture in transition and often disconcerted, a large number of horse welfare specialists also support 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 paramount and veterinarians can, through their own professional activity, contribute decisively to it.

Conflict of Interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Animal welfare statement

not applicable

Special thanks

The authors would like to thank Dr. med. vet. Lindsay Geitzenauer, for proofreading and editing the text.

References

- 1 Poncet PA, Burkhardt R, Troillet CFP, Bachmann I (2024) Ethical Reflections on the Dignity and Wellbeing of Horses and Other Equids – Paths for Better Protection. *Equi-Scope*, Bern, Retrieved 26.01.2025, <https://www.equi-scope.ch/Htdocs/Files/v/5977.pdf> (accessed 23.09.2025)
- 2 Campbell MLH (2021) An Ethical Framework for the Use of Horses in Competitive Sport: Theory and Function. *Animals* 11, 1725, doi.org/ 10.3390/ani11061725
- 3 FEI Sports Forum (2024) – Executive Summary – Equine Ethics & Wellbeing Commission Final Report and Proposed Action Plan – [https://inside.fei.org/system/files/FEI Sports Forum 2024 – Executive Summary – Session 1 – Equine Welfare Strategy.pdf](https://inside.fei.org/system/files/FEI_Sports_Forum_2024_-_Executive_Summary_-_Session_1_-_Equine_Welfare_Strategy.pdf) (accessed 23.09.2025)
- 4 THE ETHICS CENTRE (2018) *Ethics Explainer: Social license to operate*. <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-social-license-to-operate/> (accessed 23.09.2025)
- 5 SINCLAIR G, HALL J (2022) Future of Eventing – Social License. *Online FEI Eventing Risk Management and NSO Seminar*. <https://inside.fei.org/system/files/Annex%20VIII%20-%20Future%20of%20Eventing-Social%20licence.pdf> (accessed 23.09.2025)
- 6 WORLD HORSE WELFARE (2021). What is Social License to Operate? *World Horse Welfare*. <https://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/what-we-do/research/what-is-social-licence-to-operate/> (accessed 23.09.2025)
- 7 Dyson S, Pollard D (2022) Application of a Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram and Its Relationship with Gait in a Convenience Sample of 60 Riding Horses. *Animals* 10, 1044, doi.org/ 10.3390/ani10061044
- 8 Torcivia C, McDonnell S. (2021) Equine Discomfort Ethogram. *Animals* 11, 580, doi.org/ 10.3390/ani11020580
- 9 Gleerup KB, Lindegaard C (2016), Recognition and quantification of pain in horses: A tutorial review. *Equine Vet Educ* 28, 47–57, doi.org/ 10.1111/eve.12383

Eine Untersuchung ethischer Faktoren, die sich auf die Rolle von Pferdetierärzten in der Praxis und den Prozess der Güterabwägung bei der Entscheidungsfindung auswirken

Die Rolle von Pferdetierärzten in ihrer täglichen Praxis wird stark von einer Vielzahl ethischer Faktoren beeinflusst, die ihre Entscheidungen, ihre Maßnahmen und ihre berufliche Haltung prägen. Diese Faktoren beschränken sich nicht nur auf die medizinische Versorgung von Pferden, sondern erstrecken sich auf eine ganzheitliche Betrachtung ihres Wohlergehens, ihrer Würde und der Art und Weise, wie Menschen mit ihnen umgehen, insbesondere im sich wandelnden Kontext des Pferdesports. Dieser selbst erlebt derzeit einen bedeutenden Paradigmenwechsel, der durch einen sozialen und kulturellen Wandel beeinflusst wird, der darauf abzielt, den Platz der Tiere in unserem Leben neu zu überdenken. Früher wurden Pferde in erster Linie als Werkzeuge im Dienste der sportlichen Leistung angesehen, heute werden sie als fühlende Wesen mit einem inneren Wert anerkannt, d. h. mit einer Würde und Rechten, die weder ignoriert noch missachtet werden dürfen. Diese Anerkennung verändert die Erwartungen der Gesellschaft an den Pferdesport und damit auch an die Rolle des Pferdetierarztes grundlegend. Die bloße Leistung reicht nicht mehr aus, um alle Bedingungen zu rechtfertigen, unter denen das Pferd gehalten oder eingesetzt wird. Das Wohlergehen des Pferdes steht daher im Mittelpunkt dieser Überlegungen. Es geht nicht nur darum, Schmerzen und Leiden zu vermeiden, sondern auch die natürlichen Bedürfnisse des Pferdes zu respektieren: Bewegungsfreiheit, Ausleben sozialer Verhaltensweisen, angemessene Ernährung, ausreichende Ruhe und eine anregende Umgebung. Der letzte Punkt ist entscheidend, da er psychisches oder emotionales Leiden verhindert, das oft schwieriger zu erkennen ist als körperliche Verletzungen. Der Tierarzt muss in der Lage sein, diese oft subjektiven Aspekte zu beurteilen und Praktiken zu empfehlen, die einen respektvollen Umgang mit dem Tier gewährleisten. Die Achtung des Wohlergehens geht somit über die reine Behandlung von Krankheiten hinaus und wird zu einer umfassenden Aufgabe. Der Begriff der Würde ist untrennbar mit diesem ganzheitlichen Ansatz verbunden. Ein Pferd mit Würde zu behandeln bedeutet, Praktiken zu unterlassen, die es zwingen, demütigen oder zu einem Objekt reduzieren könnten, das allein dem Menschen dient. Die Instrumentalisierung des Pferdes – d. h. seine Verwendung als bloßes Werkzeug für Wettkämpfe oder Freizeitaktivitäten – wird heute moralisch hinterfragt, da sie die Frage nach der Grenze zwischen Nutzung und Ausbeutung aufwirft. Diese Grenze ist nicht immer leicht zu bestimmen und hängt von ethischen Werten ab, die von der Gesellschaft, aber auch vom Tierarztberuf selbst geteilt werden. Anthropomorphismus ist eine weitere wichtige Gefahr. Dabei handelt es sich um den Fehler, menschliche Emotionen, Absichten oder Denkweisen auf das Pferd zu projizieren, ohne dessen spezifische Art und seine eigenen kognitiven und emotionalen Fähigkeiten zu berücksichtigen. Obwohl es unerlässlich ist, das Verhalten von Pferden aus einer empathischen Perspektive zu verstehen und zu interpretieren, muss der Tierarzt vermeiden, dieser Verzerrung zu erliegen. Eine strenge und wissenschaftliche Bewertung des Wohlbefindens ist erforderlich, um die richtigen Entscheidungen auf der Grundlage fundierter Kenntnisse der Pferdeethologie zu treffen. Die Berücksichtigung all dieser Faktoren führt zu der Notwendigkeit einer sorgfältigen „Güterabwägung“ bei tierärztlichen Entscheidungen. Dabei geht es darum, den erwarteten Nutzen für das Pferd gegen die damit verbundenen Risiken abzuwägen und dabei sein allgemeines Wohlbefinden und seine Würde zu berücksichtigen. Dieser Prozess erfordert ein ausgeprägtes Bewusstsein für ethische Fragen, insbesondere wenn es um schwerwiegende Entscheidungen wie chirurgische Eingriffe, die Beendigung der sportlichen Karriere oder sogar die Euthanasie geht. Der Tierarzt muss nicht nur erkennen, was medizinisch möglich ist, sondern vor allem auch, was aus ethischer Sicht für das Pferd und manchmal auch für die Besitzer wünschenswert ist. Heute werden bestimmte Praktiken, die früher als akzeptabel galten, zunehmend in Frage gestellt. Die übermäßige Konzentration von Pferden auf überfüllten Weiden, ein Training, das die physiologischen Fähigkeiten des Tieres übersteigt, Zwangsmaßnahmen, die angeblich die Leistung garantieren sollen, und die Vernachlässigung von Anzeichen von Leiden oder Stress sind heute nicht mehr akzeptabel. Diese Praktiken entsprechen nicht mehr den aktuellen Anforderungen an das Wohlergehen von Pferden und üben einen starken ethischen Druck auf den Tierarztberuf aus. Dieser Druck ist keineswegs nur eine zusätzliche Belastung, sondern stellt eine echte Herausforderung für Pferdetierärzte dar. Sie müssen wissenschaftliche Fachkenntnisse, technische Kompetenzen und ethisches Feingefühl miteinander verbinden und sich gleichzeitig in einem Umfeld bewegen, in dem die Erwartungen von Besitzern, Trainern, Wettkampfveranstaltern und der Öffentlichkeit widersprüchlich sein können. Diese verschiedenen Akteure haben oft unterschiedliche Interessen, und der Tierarzt befindet sich manchmal inmitten von Spannungen, die schwer zu bewältigen sind. So muss er beispielsweise manchmal eine Behandlungs- oder Eingriffsanfrage ablehnen, die zwar die Leistung eines Pferdes verbessern, aber dessen Wohlbefinden beeinträchtigen könnte. Der Tierarzt steht zudem vor einer doppelten Verantwortung: einerseits gegenüber dem Pferd, dem er respektvoll und wohlwollend begegnen muss, und andererseits gegenüber der Gesellschaft als Garant für berufliche Ethik. Diese Position erfordert einen gewissen beruflichen Mut, da die Ablehnung unzumutbarer Praktiken zu Konflikten mit den Besitzern oder Sportverbänden führen kann. Dennoch liegt der wahre ethische Wert der Rolle des Tierarztes in seiner Fähigkeit, das Wohl des Tieres zu verteidigen. Eine weitere wichtige Herausforderung ist die Beherrschung wissenschaftlicher Kenntnisse in einem sich ständig weiterentwickelnden Bereich. Fortschritte im Verständnis des Verhaltens von Tieren, des Schmerzes und der spezifischen Bedürfnisse von Pferden erfordern eine regelmäßige Überarbeitung von Protokollen und Empfehlungen. Tierärzte müssen sich schnell an diese Neuerungen anpassen und die Prinzipien der zeitgenössischen Tierethik integrieren, um den aktuellen Anforderungen gerecht zu werden, ohne an Genauigkeit oder Effizienz einzubüßen. Weiterbildung und der Dialog mit anderen Fachleuten aus den Bereichen Zucht, Sport und Tierschutz sind unerlässlich, um diese ethische Haltung zu bereichern. Der Pferdetierarzt spielt eine Schlüsselrolle bei der Sensibilisierung von Besitzern und Sportlern für diese Themen. Er kann beispielsweise respektvolle Praktiken fördern, wie die Einführung angepasster Trainingsmethoden, die Vorbeugung von Verletzungen durch vorbeugende Pflege oder die Verbesserung der täglichen Lebensbedingungen des Pferdes. Schließlich ist es wichtig zu betonen, dass die veterinärmedizinische Ethik die Komplexität der Entscheidungen nicht auf einen einfachen Gegensatz zwischen Gut und Böse reduzieren darf. Jede Situation weist Nuancen, Kompromisse und Dilemmata auf. Die Fähigkeit zur kritischen Analyse, zum kollektiven Nachdenken und zur Anpassung an spezifische Kontexte sind allesamt Elemente, die der Pferdetierarzt beherrschen muss, um seine Aufgabe bestmöglich auszuüben. In diesem Zusammenhang werden die Anerkennung des inneren Wertes des Pferdes, die Achtung seiner natürlichen Bedürfnisse, der Kampf gegen unnötige Zwänge, die Vermeidung von Demütigung und Instrumentalisierung sowie die Wachsamkeit gegenüber Anthropomorphismus zu den ethischen Säulen, auf denen eine verantwortungsvolle tierärztliche Praxis im Pferdebereich beruht. Diese Ethik zielt nicht darauf ab, Fachleuten Schuldgefühle einzureden, sondern sie bei der schwierigen Balance zwischen sportlicher Leistung, medizinischer Versorgung und tiefem Respekt vor dem Tier zu unterstützen. Pferdetierärzte bewegen sich heute in einem Umfeld, in dem ihre Rolle weit über die reine therapeutische Funktion hinausgeht und sie zu Verteidigern der Würde und des Wohlergehens des Pferdes werden. Die ethischen Herausforderungen, denen sie gegenüberstehen, sind immens, insbesondere angesichts der rasanten Entwicklung des Pferdesports und der gesellschaftlichen Erwartungen. Ihr Engagement erfordert eine entschlossene Haltung, ständig erneuerte Kompetenzen und Fähigkeiten, um die Pferde unter respektvollen, fairen und mit den moralischen Anforderungen unserer Zeit vereinbaren Bedingungen bestmöglich zu begleiten.

Schlüsselwörter: Pferdepraxis, ethische Faktoren, gesellschaftliche Akzeptanz, Güterabwägung, Entscheidungsfindung

COMPENDIUM PFERDEHEILKUNDE

Reviews, Fallberichte und Kurzreferate der aktuellen internationalen Fachliteratur
herausgegeben von Hans D. Lauk, Heidrun Gehlen, Michael Röcken und Anja Gabe
Organ der Deutschen Veterinärmedizinischen Gesellschaft – Fachgruppe Pferdekrankheiten

Jahrgang 2 – Januar/Februar – Seiten 1–80

1/2026

Fallbericht

Schwerhörigkeit als Folge einer Otitis externa aufgrund eines Othämatoms

Christine Kuhlmann, Viola Häußler, Wolfgang Scheidemann, Tina Dögl und Gerald Fritz Schusser

Review

A review of ethical factors impacting the role of equine veterinarians in practice and the process of weighing interests in decision-making

Montavon Stéphane, Poncet Pierre-André and Trolliet Charles

Original article

Dextromethorphan and trace level detections of Dextrorphan in post-race urine samples – a case report and analysis

Kimberly Brewer, Justin C. Holmes, Clara Fenger, Abelardo Morales-Briceño, Andreas F. Lehner, George A. Maylin, Robert Holland, Levent Dirikolu, and Thomas Tobin

Kurzberichte aktueller Beiträge aus

American Journal of Veterinary Research, Animals, Equine Veterinary Education, Equine Veterinary Journal, Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association, Journal of Animal Physiology and Animal Nutrition, Journal of Equine Veterinary Science, Journal of Veterinary Cardiology, Journal of Veterinary Dentistry, Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, Research in Veterinary Science, Theriogenology, Veterinary Behaviour, Veterinary Dermatology, Veterinary Journal, Veterinary Ophthalmology, Veterinary Pathology, Veterinary Radiology and Ultrasound, Veterinary Record, Veterinary Research, Veterinary Surgery