Horse Euthanasia: The Elephant in the Room

In my work as a veterinarian, it is common for people to ask about end of life issues for their pets.

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As an equine veterinarian, I rarely participate in euthanasia for small animals, but am frequently involved in the subject of euthanasia as related to horses. I made a decision many years ago to allow my heart to remain open and to be present with each euthanasia case; I never want to be closed or calloused to death. It is easy to shut down and is far more difficult to keep our hearts open through the pain and difficult time of euthanasia. After hundreds of animal euthanasias, I am still deeply touched by each one.

It is difficult to make the decision to euthanize, as it should be. Sometimes we “just know” when the time seems right. In other cases, the decision does not seem clear. What should we do in those cases? I encourage people to use all resources available to help them evaluate the animal’s quality of life. Management issues and finances can play a big role in the decision-making process. With animals that have an illness or debilitation, I encourage clients to look at the situation from different points of view:

- Is the illness/debilitation life-threatening or is there a chance the animal will recover, even if it may go through a rough period?
- Is the recovery/treatment financially feasible?
- Is the recovery/treatment manageable for the client?

If the owner can’t handle the recovery/treatment, is there someone else who can help? An example of a treatment-intensive and costly debilitation is laminitis (i.e., founder). These cases often require much care and specialized treatment, medicines, etc. In circumstances like this, where clients simply don’t have the time and/or finances to achieve recovery, it is often better for the owner and for the horse to make the difficult decision to euthanize.
On the other hand, one invalid reason to euthanize is “because the horse is old.” I don’t refer to old as an age, but rather as a state the body is in. Our ability to manage horses as they get older has improved dramatically in the last 20 years, often making their actual age deceptive in relation to their health and/or their quality of life. Also, there are 17-year-old horses that are “old,” with a very poor quality of life due to physical ailments, and there are horses in their 30s that are easy to maintain, sound, and can be ridden lightly. Because of this, I recommend evaluating the individual horse’s health and not just considering its age.

Sometimes it seems as though the animal helps us make the decision. For example, some colic cases are so severe that the horse is in agony. In those cases, euthanasia may be the best decision to end the horse’s suffering.

Often, just before a potentially severe Montana winter, the decision is made to euthanize elderly and/or crippled horses. Many owners don’t want an old or crippled horse to suffer through the winter or they can no longer afford the senior feed that keeps weight on an old horse through the winter. Another important winter consideration is if the horse is having trouble getting around or lies down and struggles to get up. In that case, it may be a good decision to euthanize before the horse has to struggle with the snow and ice, risking the chance it could either lie down or fall down and not be able to get up.

Once the decision is made to euthanize, the next decision is who will do the euthanasia. In Montana, it is common for owners to euthanize their horses themselves with a gun, however, another option is to have a veterinarian euthanize the horse with a solution that shuts down respiration and stops the heart. Using a gun is actually very humane and very quick, if it is done properly. Understanding the precise location of the brain is a key element in this method to eliminate the possibility of additional suffering by the horse.

If a veterinarian uses a euthanasia solution, the horse must be buried, cremated or taken to a landfill (with prior approval). All veterinarians perform euthanasia differently. Ask your veterinarian to walk you through their preferred procedure so that you have an idea of how things will go. Below is the procedure I use as a veterinarian, including options for disposing of the body.

I prefer the owners to be present during euthanasia of their animal, if possible. I have had numerous clients say that, though it was difficult, being present made it possible for them to know exactly what happened and how the horse died, and that it really did help them with closure. Another thing that is important to me is to have the horse’s “friends” or pasture-mates present. While we may not understand how they say goodbye, and I think it is arrogant of us to assume they can’t handle the death of their friend, often our solution is to physically exclude them. I always encourage horse owners to allow pasture-mates to be present while a horse is being euthanized, and I have witnessed some very powerful experiences in doing so. Sometimes pasture-mates just wander off and graze; sometimes they smell the body just prior to burial; sometimes they run around wildly. Regardless of what they do, the owners who do this almost always report that the “friends” seem much more settled than in other cases where a pasture-mate just disappeared and never came back.

For me, sedating horses prior to euthanasia has not worked well, so I choose not to sedate the horse first. It is different with small animals. I always sedate them prior to euthanizing. My procedure for horses is as follows:

With the owner holding the horse, I put a catheter in the horse’s jugular vein. When the owner is ready and has finished saying their goodbyes, I take the horse from them, ask everyone present to stand a safe distance away, and then I give the euthanasia solution. Most often, a horse will rock back and fall on its side, at which time the remainder of the
solution is given. On occasion, a horse will fall hard and roll over or fall and paddle with its legs — this is not common but it can happen. Sometimes the diaphragm will expel air after the horse is dead, which can be startling because of how somber the moment is. There also can be muscle tremors immediately after the horse is dead. Because of these occurrences, it is important to stay behind the horse’s back and not stand or kneel near its legs. I then listen with a stethoscope to make sure the heart has stopped.

Most often the burial hole has been dug prior to the procedure and the backhoe operator is present so that the horse can be buried as soon as it is euthanized. If you are unsure about local rules regarding burying a horse on your property, call your local County Sanitarian’s Office (a.k.a., County Health Office). I have, on occasion, met the owner and horse at the landfill and performed the euthanasia there.

Another option we are very fortunate to have in some areas is an animal cemetery/crematorium. An example of one near Bozeman is called At Home on the Range, and I have found them fabulous to work with. If an owner chooses this option, once the horse is euthanized, personnel from the animal cemetery/crematorium load the horse and transport it to their facility for burial or cremation — whichever option the client has chosen. Animal cemeteries/crematories are available for small animals as well.

It is crucial that owners have a plan in place for disposal of the horse prior to the euthanasia, to avoid domestic animals, predators, or birds accessing the euthanized body. In some cases, I have had clients with old and/or debilitated horses that weren’t ready to euthanize in the fall, but there was a good possibility that the horse would need to be euthanized sometime during winter. In this situation, due to the potential difficulty of digging a burial hole in the winter, the burial site was dug in the fall. Fence panels were then placed around the hole for safety. With this effort, the burial site was ready if needed in the middle of winter. The owners need not be present for the burial. In fact, I request that clients leave prior to burying, and then I help the backhoe operator, if needed.

Finally, as difficult as it is to go through the death of a beloved horse, please don’t close your heart with the loss, instead keep it open so that another horse can enter your life.