

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia is a very difficult subject for all horse owners; it is a highly emotional issue yet it is important to address the situation from a practical perspective. There may come a time when, for humane, medical, economic or safety reasons you may need to consider this option for your horse. The decision to euthanise or induce a painless death should never be made without careful consideration. The right choice is clearly the one that is in the interest of the horse and the humans who care for it. Here we present two views; a veterinary and an experienced breeder/trainer.

Euthanasia

Words by Simon Constable BVSc Cert AVP MRCVS

Euthanasia in animals and particular in horses is a harsh reality of life. As horse owners we have a responsibility to provide a good quality of life but equally importantly we need to decide the correct time for euthanasia. It is very unusual for a horse to die from natural causes (old age, heart problems etc) because there are other diseases or conditions that become significant in later life (such as colic or osteo-arthritis) that often necessitate elective euthanasia.

Unlike in humans where it is illegal in the UK, animals and especially horses are frequently subjected to euthanasia; it is preferable to perform euthanasia rather than let a sick animal die.

The moral decision for euthanasia is a difficult one and timing it correctly is probably the most difficult decision a horse owner has to make. The time to make the decision should be based on "quality of life"; unfortunately this is very subjective and there is no absolute measurement or estimate when the quality of life becomes inadequate. The onus is on the owner to make the decision to euthanase (the word "euthanize" is American) but this largely comes on the advice of the veterinary surgeon; the importance of advice from friends and relatives should not be understated in coming to the right decision. It must be remembered that the horse is the most important factor in this decision; our personal thoughts and attachments must take second place to the welfare of the animal. This is easier said than done and "letting go" is horrendously difficult because there is a feeling of "I've killed my horse". It is important to realise that this most definitely isn't the case; euthanasia is a welfare issue and is done on humane grounds.

Admittedly there are other situations where euthanasia is performed. The most common other reason is for financial reasons; this may seem to be the wrong reason for euthanasia but it is a reality that horses are expensive to own and keep. The alternative to this is to give the horse away. However that can lead to several problems; one is that finding a sanctuary can be very difficult (almost impossible in my experience). Another very important issue is that once you surrender control of the horse, unless a strict agreement is in place (which rarely happens), the new "owner" may do anything they desire with that horse and this may include standards

of care that fall below your own. Also the horse could be sold on and the previous owner loses contact entirely; there have even been stories of "loved" horses being saved from the meat wagon despite being given to a home that "would never sell him". In these cases, particularly if the horse has an illness or injury (permanent lameness, for example) there is a strong argument for euthanasia.

There are two methods of euthanasia; one is the lethal injection, the other is shooting. To the horse, in my opinion, both methods are equally humane, although head-shy horses may benefit more from lethal injection and needle-shy horses may benefit from shooting.

Lethal injection

To the owner and observers lethal injection is a far more controlled procedure and mimics the induction of general anaesthesia prior to surgical procedures; obviously for euthanasia, a larger lethal dose of a more concentrated solution is used. Initially a sedative is normally given to provide a more controlled euthanasia (although if the horse cannot stand as a result of a fractured leg this may be omitted because can cause wobbliness). Once the lethal injection is administered, the drugs work to anaesthetise the horse so that it becomes unconscious and then shortly afterwards the heart stops. This whole process takes between 30 seconds and two to three minutes but the horse is unconscious throughout. Obviously as drugs are being used the horse cannot be used for human or animal consumption.

Shooting

This uses either a free bullet (a conventional gun) or a captive bolt (similar to a gun but has a bolt that remains attached to the hand-piece; this requires pithing with a rod); both have an explosive charge that fires when the trigger is pulled. This is a more dramatic and perhaps more distressing procedure to observers because the horse suddenly drops to the floor and may have involuntary leg movements but it is very quick. Unfortunately with the nature of this form of euthanasia, there is frequently a large amount of blood from the horse's nose.

Disposal of the body

The Animal By-Products Regulation 2003 does not allow the burial of livestock. This includes horses (although pet

Costs involved with euthanasia.

Costs will vary across the country but these are guideline prices:

- Gun: £80 plus visit
- Injection: £120-160 plus visit
- Collection and disposal: minimum £120-£200

animals such as dogs, cats, rabbits, gerbils, etc can be buried). Therefore, horses must be removed for cremation or for meat (unpalatable it may be for many of us, this does occur). One of the difficulties with euthanasia of horses (and ponies) is the size and weight of the body. Whereas in dogs they can generally be easily picked up by the owner, this is not possible in a horse and powerful lifting equipment or a winch is needed. This can be a very distressing time for the owner and it is generally better not to watch.

As a result of the Animal By-Products Regulation 2003 there have been more stringent rules for slaughter-men and knacker-men; this has meant the increase in the disposal costs for horse-owners. Whereas previously, the service would be free if the horse was being fed to the hounds (particularly common if the horse had been used for hunting), now the minimum charge in 2011 is £120 and frequently much more. If the owner wants the return of the ashes in addition to the cremation the cost may be several hundred pounds because

an individual cremation is required to ensure that all the ashes returned are those of one horse. These ashes can be kept in a casket, scattered or planted along with a tree.

Finally, if the horse has a companion or other horses are “bonded” to it, there is a need to allow them to “say goodbye”. This may seem a macabre thing to do but if the dead horse is taken away without the others realising that the horse has been euthanased, they may assume that the horse has been taken away, alive. Therefore, allowing them to sniff the dead horse, although very difficult and emotional for onlookers may help to reduce the distress of any stable-mates.

Although everything concerned with euthanasia provokes high emotion and it can be a distressing time, if handled correctly and competently it can be a sympathetic and respectful way of saying goodbye to a much-loved horse or pony.

“We should be grateful that euthanasia is legal and acceptable in animals”

Euthanasia

Words by Emma Maxwell

Euthanasia is not a popular topic to discuss but one that reaches all horses owners at some point in their lives. It is a decision most people prefer to make in privacy, but that fact makes it harder for people to decide what to do when the big question arises. Everyone has a different point at which they can take no more, and coming from a large breeding enterprise where perhaps I saw it more regularly than a small breeder, my dial is probably set to making the decision more quickly than some of you will be comfortable with; especially someone arriving at this point for the first time. There are no rules, which makes it harder, you have to make your own choice as to when the right time is according to your history and circumstances and experience with each particular horse.

Veterinary science does move on all the time, but often on the backs of unsuccessful experiments and you will also find I sound very old fashioned in regard to some things that vets may claim are not necessarily fatal. In my experience they often are fatal but only after six months or so of very expensive treatment and investigation. If you can afford this, or are insured you are doing veterinary science a favour, if you cannot afford it, you should not be ashamed or guilty about having to put a horse down for some of the following reasons. Secondly the pain and discomfort a horse feels during its unsuccessful convalescence is a factor to consider. The instant decisions are shocking but perhaps not so hard to make and I think a broken limb or severe and sudden onset founder is an extremely good case for putting down on the spot. I have seen one filly with a compound fracture in a front fetlock survive to have a useful life as broodmare, but she was incredibly lucky and had the right tough but sensible temperament to deal with her very long and very painful





confinement. Most horses don't and you will put yourself and your horse through unnecessary pain by trying to save it. However injuries such as bone cracks and other major tendon, ligament or joint injuries seem to heal remarkably well if rested for long enough. I am generally (sorry vets) not inclined to do much poking about with these other sorts of injuries, rest the horse until it is sound and then **rest it a bit more**. We used to send horses who had time off for tendon injuries out for a further six months to live outside. To get them out we would sedate heavily and then put them out on the rain in a New Zealand to try and stop the first mad run about which usually worked. When a horse comes back into work you have to maintain very high level of observation of the damaged leg to ensure that anytime it heats or swells even slightly you rest again. Insufficient rest and not enough observation can often be the cause of chronic lameness.

However there are recurring injuries and conditions which cause chronic lameness. If a young horse there are issues to consider before keeping the horse a breeding horse, whether the condition or a susceptibility is heritable, or if an injury whether conformational defects contributed. If heredity is a likely cause it is far better to euthanase than to carry breeding more horses which will possibly give other people the same heartache in a future generation. In an older horse the considerations are the severity of the lameness and their general wellbeing in other respects.

Laminitis is another terrible painful affliction which is a major cause of putting horses down. A toxic, or stress laminitis (as long as the circumstances surrounding that bout are not maintained) can be completely recoverable from even if severe. A regular bout of laminitis in a horse with the other symptoms that show susceptibility is more worrying. If your horse does not come round in a very small number of days from the initial bout and shows a degree of pedal

bone rotation, I would not argue about making the decision to put them down sooner rather than later. Chronic cases of laminitis which linger on are very depressing for both horse and owner and rarely end happily.

Colic, once a horse has reached a certain age it may not be fair to operate on them. Everyone has a different age to set this bar at, but around fifteen seems sensible.

Much, much harder is lingering old age and vague lameness. Again, all these decisions are up to the individual and much as you may feel a horse deserves a long and happy retirement it is not always a practical or an affordable option. I know it is not considered a nice thing to discuss but economics are a relevant factor. If long term care

is affecting your family adversely, or affecting you ability to look after any other horse you own properly; euthanasia of a clearly ancient or not very sound horse is an option that can be considered. There is not room in the world for everyone's old horse to be a companion at someone else's expense and retirement homes are full to brimming. Handing a horse in very old age on to someone else is dodging the issue.

Temperament: at Lodge Farm we put down two male horses for uncontrollable behaviour. One was a very pretty two year old who had flashes of rage and no respect for us and used to jump on you regularly. He was not much improved by gelding and it seemed irresponsible to try and sell him on. The second was a repossessed who was under threat of being put down at a livery yard which had not been paid for his keep for 2 years. He kicked very badly if you came anywhere near his flank or hind end, we think as result of hit on the penis every time he drew. We kept him for two years and raced him from home hoping he would settle – he was otherwise respectful and pleasant. However he kicked out and dislocated our head girl's pelvis just as our guard was dropping and regretfully we decided that euthanasia was the only choice for him. Over the years my viewpoint has hardened considerably on dangerous horses. I used to think you could rehabilitate them all and that it wasn't their fault. Now I am not so sure. Experience can turn a horse nasty; but not without some genetic input as well. Many horses have bad experiences but not all will then later attack people. I would think very, very seriously about putting down a stallion that attacked someone. Horses are domesticated and this behaviour is just not necessary in a world that already has too many horses. Certain experiences can provoke a horse into attacking, severe halter trainers are one cause, but recently I have heard of or seen more than one horse who has suffered a temperament problem after semen collection.