**Equine Euthanasia – Do you have a plan?**

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Most horse owners avoid the subject of euthanasia and do not plan for the situation until the time comes when they need to make a decision. The absence of a plan increases the distress owners feel and can delay decision making which will most likely impact negatively on the animal’s quality of life and welfare.

Responsible ownership of any animal involves making the difficult decision to put them to sleep when circumstances require, and horse ownership is no different. The frequency of having to make the decision to euthanize however is generally greater for horse owners compared to owners of small animals that can more frequently be cared for appropriately until they die of natural causes. In contrast, the need for horses to be able to move freely and eat forage mean that horses who have sustained an injury preventing them from being active and older horses that have worn down their teeth and are unable to eat adequate forage, often have a reduced quality of life. Acute and chronic illness and behavioural problems are also common reasons for horses requiring euthanasia. A change in owner circumstances resulting in the owner no longer being able to provide appropriate care may also result in horses being euthanased to prevent unnecessary suffering. Previously animal charities were able to offer sanctuary to horses in these situations however charities now report being full to capacity all year round meaning that the responsible owner must make the extremely difficult decision to put their horse to sleep to prevent an uncertain future and potential suffering.

It is recommended that well before the situation arises, all owners make a plan of how they want their horse to be euthanased and what they want to happen afterwards. Such a plan will help to reduce distress during an extremely upsetting situation and will help the process to run smoothly. World Horse Welfare has developed a form where owners can record their wishes. The form includes horse and owner details, preferred method of euthanasia and preferred method of disposal. The form should be reviewed periodically for any required amendments and a copy given to the yard owner or those who care for the horse on a regular basis. If an emergency develops and the owner cannot be contacted the person dealing with the horse will hopefully be able to follow the owners wishes.

**Options for Euthanasia:**

The method of euthanasia chosen should be the most appropriate for the horse and for the owner’s situation. Horses that are head shy are more suited to lethal injection whilst this would not be a suitable method for those that are difficult to inject. Injection is usually the most expensive method but can be carried out discreetly where there are other horses and people nearby. In emergency situations it may not be possible to control the area where the horse is put to sleep but if the euthanasia is planned it is best to happen in a location that facilitates how the animal will be disposed. Horses that are to be taken away should ideally be located in an area with easy vehicle access, whilst those that are to be buried on the premises should be euthanased near to the burial site. Of paramount importance is the welfare of the horse. Animals should be kept calm and relaxed and those that are injured or ill should not be moved if at all possible. The animal is not aware of what is going to happen although they can sense tension in the people around them which could affect their behaviour.

*Lethal Injection*

A lethal injection can only be administered by a vet. Euthanasia by injection consists of an overdose of anaesthetic drugs being administered to the horse intravenously via an injection or catheter in the horse’s neck. Often the vet will administer a sedative before the lethal injection to help keep the horse calm during the process. Very shortly after the injection is given the horse loses consciousness and falls to the ground. At this point the horse is not aware of what is happening and cannot feel discomfort or pain. The vet will monitor the horses pulse until death can be confirmed which is very shortly after the injection. The horse’s legs and body may twitch or show movement and some horses produce a gasp sound which can be distressing for the owner/handler if they are not aware that this can happen. The movements and sound are due to the muscles and diaphragm relaxing however the horse is not conscious at this time. The horses eyes will also open, the pupil will dilate and the eye will look glassy.

*Free Bullet*

Euthanasia by free bullet can be performed by a vet or trained, licensed professional such as hunt personnel or by Fallen Stock Collectors. If performed by or in conjunction with a vet a sedative is often given first. The gun is placed on the horse’s forehead just above the eyes. Immediately the gun is discharged the horse will fall to the ground and blood will appear from the horse’s nose and forehead and in some cases from the ears. As for lethal injection, the legs and body will twitch and there will be gasp noises. These may continue for longer than for lethal injection as the heart can take longer to stop, however the horse is not alive and is not suffering or in pain. The accuracy of the bullet is paramount therefore free bullet would not be the preferred method for head shy or fractious horses.

**Options for Disposal:**

Removing the body of a euthanased horse is difficult due to its size and weight and usually requires machinery. As a result, removal can be distressing for the owner to watch so they are usually recommended not to be there at that time. Disposal options will depend on the method of euthanasia and the horse’s medical history alongside the finances available and services on offer.

*Burial*

Owners may wish to bury their horse on their own private land. Advice and permission must be sort from the Environment Agency and local authority before the animal is buried as there are regulations regarding the depth and location of burial. Heavy machinery will also be required therefore forward planning is required for this method of disposal.

*Cremation/Incineration*

According to European Regulation (EC) 1069/2009 horse’s euthanased by lethal injection must be cremated / incinerated to prevent veterinary medicines being passed to other animals or entering the food chain. Horses that do not have medicines recorded on their passport may be disposed of via burial, local hunt kennels or abattoirs. Cremation is the more costly method of disposal although group cremations will reduce the cost. Private cremations are the most costly but allow the owner to have all or part of the animal’s ashes.

*Local Hunt and Fallen Stock Collectors*

Local hunts are the traditional method of disposing of horse’s euthanased by free bullet and may still be available in your local area. Fallen Stock Collectors offer a variety of services from euthanasia to disposal only, including arranging for cremation and return of ashes.

**Regardless of which method of euthanasia and disposal used it is a legal requirement for owners to notify the relevant passport issuing organisation of the horse’s death. Insurance companies should also be informed.**

**Friends at the End Scheme**

The British Horse Society (BHS) have an initiative called ‘Friends at the End’ that is designed to make sure that no horse owner has to face the loss of their equine alone. Owners can contact Friends at the End to discuss their concerns and receive support. Methods of euthanasia and options for disposal can all be discussed and if the owner feels they are unable to be with their horse when the time comes to be put them sleep they can request practical support through the process.

**Useful Contacts:**

* World Horse Welfare – www.worldhorsewelfare.org
* British Horse Society – www.bhs.org.uk
* Friends at the End – 02476 840517 or email friendsattheend@bhs.org.uk
* National Fallen Stock Company – www.nsfco.co.uk