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EUTHANASIA – SAYING GOODBYE

We know this is a very sensitive subject but it is important for you to be aware of the reasons for euthanasia, the options available and the possible arrangements for disposal of the body. Learning about euthanasia now will enable you, should it become necessary, to say goodbye to your horse in a dignified and peaceful way.

What is euthanasia?

The aim of euthanasia is to provide a swift, painless death for our animals in order to end any unnecessary suffering. Euthanasia can be referred to in many ways, for example 'put down', 'put to sleep', and 'destroy'.

When is euthanasia necessary?

The quality of your horse's life will always have been of your highest priority. When horses become old or ill, their quality of life deteriorates, and it is understandable to want to protect your horse from pain or suffering.

The final decision is likely to be made based mainly on welfare grounds, often following prior consultation with the veterinary surgeon.

How is euthanasia performed?

There are two methods of euthanasia: injection of an overdose of drugs and use of a gun.

- **Lethal injection**

Your horse will need to be sedated initially. Then via a catheter inserted into a vein or a simple intravenous injection, strong barbiturates will be administered. The injection induces a rapid and pain-free death. Your horse will fall down and lose consciousness and the ability to feel pain or fear.

Your horse may make some gasps during the procedure and this can be distressing for you to see. But these are only natural reflexes and your horse will be clinically dead when they occur.

This method is not appropriate for all horses, especially those that do not like injections. The body of a horse euthanased in this way cannot be disposed of by processing (e.g. through a slaughterhouse or hunt kennels) and this will substantially increase the costs of disposal. Cremation is the only form of disposal.

- **Use of a gun**

This can be done with or without the use of a sedative. The gun is placed below the forelock. The bullet passes into the brain resulting in instantaneous death. There is a loud noise as the gun goes off, and your horse will fall very suddenly to the ground, possibly with some bleeding from the nose. The horse will not hear or feel anything. Occasionally, your horse's limbs will continue to move when it is on the ground but these are normal reflexes after death.

The body of a horse euthanased in this way can be disposed of by processing or by cremation. The choice of disposal should be arranged before or at the time of euthanasia.

Should I be there at the end?

You should discuss with your vet in advance whether you wish to be with your horse at the end. Your horse may be less nervous if familiar people are with him when the vet arrives. However, if you are frightened or anxious, your horse may sense this and become nervous. Do not feel embarrassed or guilty if you do not wish to be present. Euthanasia of a horse, particularly when a gun is used, can be distressing to observers.

Who decides that the time is right for euthanasia?

Your vet will be able to advise you on the options for euthanasia and will answer any questions you may have.

It is usually possible to have some time to make the decision, apart from emergency situations, and it may be helpful to discuss the situation with your family or other horse owners who perhaps have already experienced this situation. If your horse is insured and its death will lead to a claim, it is very important to inform the insurance company that euthanasia is being considered and get their agreement beforehand.

Whenever possible, euthanasia should ideally be performed during normal working days, during daylight hours and at a quiet time of the day (both in terms of presence of people and movements of other horses). To ease the arrival of all the personnel involved it is better performed away from the "rush hour". You also have to bear in mind that "an old arthritic friend" might thank you more if euthanasia followed a pleasant autumn rather than during or after a harsh winter....

Where can it be done?

Euthanasia can rarely be performed in the stable as access for collection should always be borne in mind. The use of the gun requires open space, if possible away from residential or equine dwellings.

What happens to the body?

There are several options for disposal of your horse's body but these depend on the method of euthanasia used. Whichever option for disposal you chose, it is usually better to have all the arrangements made in advance.

- **Processing**

The body can only be sent for processing by a slaughterhouse or hunt kennels if the method of euthanasia was by shooting. This involves a cost of between £100 to £150.

When lethal injection is used, the drug levels in the horse's body remain very high and it is not safe to be processed in this way. Also if your horse has been on some medication your horse's body might have to be cremated. You should always check with your veterinary surgeon prior to making any arrangements.

- **Cremation**

This is an increasingly popular option although it can be quite expensive

Some crematoriums also provide an "individual cremation" service for an extra cost, which allows you to have your horse's ashes back.

The costs involved vary between £300 (group cremation) to £600 (individual cremation).

- **Burial**

Unfortunately, this is not a very realistic option because burial is limited to specific sites by law and is controlled by the DEFRA. The Environment agency should also be consulted with regard to appropriate sites.

