

This document has been developed to create a single set of guidelines for equine euthanasia, following the recommendation of the Horse Welfare Board's strategy A Life Well Lived. Equine welfare is the core principle of these guidelines, which have been written by a cross-industry panel.

The guidelines are intended for those who work with and have a responsibility for horses bred for racing, at any stage of life. This is not a prescriptive document, and sensible judgement should be applied in each individual set of circumstances. The guidelines are not intended to replace veterinary advice, nor to advise veterinary surgeons.

### Definition

Euthanasia is derived from the Greek terms 'eu' meaning good and 'thanatis' meaning death. There are a number of definitions of euthanasia:

- 'The act or practice of putting painlessly to death'<sup>1</sup>
- 'Painless killing to relieve suffering'<sup>2</sup>

Euthanasia does not include the slaughter of animals for human consumption.<sup>3</sup>

### Summary

When euthanasia is used according to its definition it is an essential welfare tool that should be regarded, when carried out ethically and responsibly, as an acceptable outcome and not as a failure. The measure of an individual's lifespan is not a measure of its welfare.

Used in this way euthanasia can be viewed as a protection mechanism against compromised welfare, which addresses the risk that an animal will no longer experience a good life ("a life well lived"). These issues may relate to unmanageable pain caused by injury, illness or deformity, or other factors impacting negatively on an animal's wellbeing, such as compromised health, inappropriate nutrition, or an unsuitable environment (The Five Provisions).<sup>4</sup>

Other equally weighted considerations include unmanageable or dangerous equine behavioural factors, or a change in the circumstances of owners or keepers, including financial and emotional considerations, all of which may impact negatively on a horse's welfare, either in the short or longer term.

In veterinary terms, acceptable euthanasia can therefore be carried out to avoid immediate, unmanageable pain and suffering, or can be "elective" considering e.g. the owner/keeper's ability to maintain the welfare of the animal, or for behavioural reasons. For example, if a consequence of an owner/keeper's change in circumstances is that the current or future welfare of a horse is compromised and cannot be assured, euthanasia of the horse may be an appropriate option.

<sup>1</sup> The Chambers English Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> RCVS Euthanasia of animals <http://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/euthanasia-of-animals/> (Accessed 15th June 2020)

<sup>3</sup> BVA Euthanasia <https://www.bva.co.uk/resources-support/ethical-guidance/euthanasia-of-animals-guide/> (Accessed 15th June 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Updating Animal Welfare Thinking <https://www.oie.int/eng/animal-welfare-conf2016/PTT/1.1.%20Mellor.pdf> (Accessed 23rd June 2020)

### **Equine euthanasia: Guiding principles**

The decision to euthanise is always regarded as being the responsibility of the owner.<sup>5</sup> Horses should be assessed for quality of life, not longevity.

The primary purpose of euthanasia is to relieve or prevent suffering. The decision to follow this option, usually made in consultation with a veterinary surgeon, will be based on an assessment of many factors. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' guidance sets out examples of such factors as follows: "The extent and nature of the disease or injuries, other treatment options, the prognosis and potential quality of life after treatment, the availability and likelihood of success of treatment, the animal's age and/or other disease/health status and the ability of the owner to pay for private treatment."

Elective euthanasia of a horse should only be carried out when those who have responsibility for its welfare (usually the owner or designated keeper, often in consultation with a veterinary surgeon) have considered all available options and decided that it is in the best interests of the horse, considering both current and future circumstances.

Euthanasia should be at the discretion of those responsible for the horse but always carried out with respect and compassion.

Euthanasia should only be carried out by a person qualified and experienced in the method used. Acceptable methods are lethal injection or, where safe and appropriate, licensed firearm.

<sup>5</sup> Animal Welfare Act 2006 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/section/3> (Accessed 15th June 2020)

### **Specific considerations for horses bred for racing**

Further guidance on euthanasia is available by referring to the attached euthanasia decision tree and to the considerations listed below:

- a)** Horses should not endure continuous unmanageable pain in the presence of a hopeless prognosis, as a result of acute injury, trauma, chronic or incurable conditions.
- b)** Young stock of all ages with severe deformity, conformational or developmental disorders should not be exposed to prolonged life where their welfare is continuously compromised.
- c)** Consideration should be given to euthanasia if a horse's condition deteriorates so that further veterinary treatment is rendered hopeless.
- d)** Horses should not have to endure a lifetime of box confinement to ensure prevention or relief of pain or suffering.
- e)** Consideration should be given to euthanasia of horses suffering with unmanageable or dangerous behavioural or medical conditions that result in it being a hazard to itself, other horses or handlers.
- f)** Consideration should be given to euthanasia if an animal requires a lifetime of analgesic medication.
- g)** Consideration should be given to euthanasia in the case of breeding stock which have significant genetic or severe conformational defects and which are unable to be used for activities other than breeding.
- h)** Consideration should be given to euthanasia in cases of financial hardship which are likely to lead to a lack of appropriate care and attention and in circumstances when all responsible rehoming efforts have been exhausted.
- i)** Legal considerations should be assessed in the event of the owner or a representative being untraceable or not willing to consent to euthanasia.
- j)** Whenever possible, euthanasia should be performed at home or in suitable surroundings, exceptions would include on a racecourse and in veterinary clinics.
- k)** Horses exhibiting acute pain or injury that require immediate euthanasia on welfare grounds, should not be transported.

## Concluding Statement

When used appropriately and ethically, euthanasia is an essential component of equine welfare. The decision to euthanise should be carried out by those who have a responsibility for a horse's welfare, and who have already considered all other available options. Euthanasia should be carried out with compassion and respect for the horse and only by someone who is qualified and experienced in the method used. The Euthanasia Decision Tree has been developed to help guide the decision-making process.

The decision to euthanise is not straightforward, often complex and emotional. It is encouraged that owners, or anyone affected by the decision to euthanise, should access the further guidance and support that is available.

## Further Support and Guidance

- **[World Horse Welfare. Just in Case](#)** – A useful guide and an Owner's Plan, designed to help guide owners through the process. Their compassionate and knowledgeable team are on hand to talk about end of life planning.  
Telephone - 01953 497 238
- **[British Horse Society. Friends at the End](#)** – An initiative designed to make sure no horse owner has to face loss of their equine companion alone. All of the Friends at the End team have received training from bereavement counsellors and can offer an extra source of support.  
Email – [friendsattheend@bhs.org.uk](mailto:friendsattheend@bhs.org.uk) | Telephone – 02476 840517
- **[Blue Cross Bereavement Service](#)** - Offers a free and confidential telephone helpline and email service to bereaved pet owners, through a network of trained volunteers. The Bereavement Support Service is available 365 days of the year to those who need help.  
Email – [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk) | Telephone – 0800 096 6606 (8:30am – 8:30pm)