



Fight the fat!

Improving equine welfare in Britain is a relentless challenge – there are so many problems driven by a multitude of different factors that range from the high-profile issues that are well and truly in the public eye, to the more subtle issues that may not always be perceived as a problem. The fact that public opinion does not see some welfare issues as a major concern presents its own challenges; behaviour change is not possible without first recognising that there is a problem.

There have been a wide variety of high-profile issues over the past decade. These include concerns about specific incidents, such as the Grand National injuries and fatalities and hyperflexion of the neck (Rollkur) in dressage. These debates will continue to roll on, and opinion is divided on the best way forward, but the overriding imperative for all those involved in horse sport is to demonstrate clearly and regularly that horse welfare is their highest priority.

The more intransigent matters are often concentrated in specific geographical areas. Tethering is (and always has been) of great concern to the general public in the UK. Most people, equine savvy or otherwise, do not like to see horses restricted in this way. There are of course many complications inherent in this style of management, the reasons for it, as well as the risks presented by it. Does this mean welfare organisations should intervene every time a horse is tethered? While the public may perceive this as the obvious solution, it is completely unrealistic. The capacity simply is not there to take in all of these horses, nor would it be legal. In addition, some horses cope remarkably well with being tethered, and it can be difficult to substantiate any claims that their welfare is being significantly compromised.

Another widespread issue that has gained a high profile in recent months is fly grazing. The act of grazing horses on land without permission is not a new phenomenon but it is certainly becoming more visible. The reality is that people who graze their horses without permission on land they do not own often do not have the resources to care for their horses in any conventional way. There are about 2800 horses in UK charities and rescue centres, with a trend towards increased admissions and 'group' cases, and an estimated 6000 horses that may be considered to be 'on the brink' [1]. A difficult winter could prove to be the tipping point, leading to a highly visible horse crisis. UK equine and welfare charities have adopted a coordinated effort to try to avoid this happening.

The more subtle welfare problems include overbreeding and this is closely linked to the problems of tethering and fly grazing. The fact is that there are more horses in the UK now than there are good homes. Ponies are available at sales for as little as £5 and still remain unsold. It can be difficult to rehome safely all but the healthiest of horses, even if offered 'free to a good home', yet people continue to breed. Why is this?

The causes are multifaceted, encompassing professional breeders, hobby breeders and those individuals who allow herds to run together unchecked. All are responsible to some degree, and all can have an impact on the problem, but only if they acknowledge their contribution to it. While horse owners continue to breed for questionable reasons, such as to give an out-of-work mare 'a purpose', or 'to prevent laminitis', or simply because they like their horse, the problem will continue. If the market is flooded with horses, it is those at the lower end that suffer. The so-called meat man gets the blame for picking up the pieces, but we must all take responsibility for permitting this widespread and deep-seated problem to continue.

Then we get onto the ultimate issue – obesity – where perception is the first critical challenge. Overweight equids are now so common that it has become the norm, and convincing people otherwise is a diplomatic nightmare. Awareness of this issue is a problem across the board – including in man, cats and dogs – but, if anything, fatness is even more pronounced in horses. Equids are big animals that carry weight well,

making it all the more difficult for people to recognise when they are obese. When shown a picture of a horse 180 kg overweight, the average estimate by horse owners of the additional weight carried was less than 15% of this true figure [2].

One of the most difficult challenges to overcome is getting people to recognise that fat is a health risk. The vast majority of people will readily recognise that an emaciated horse is 'ill' or at least has health risks but relatively few will have the same perception for one that is overweight, misguided perhaps by a glossy coat and a 'nice rounded appearance'. Part of the problem is that horses do not die simply because they are fat – they die of other, often chronic, conditions associated with it. It is then all too easy for owners to disassociate the two. Until everyone accepts that long-term excess weight is seriously damaging, these problems will persist. Help is at hand as recently published work addresses new means for body condition scoring in ponies [3].

Recent research has shown that overweight animals that develop laminitis tend to have more severe signs than those that are of optimal weight and that when laminitis does occur overweight animals are more likely to die of the disease than their thinner counterparts [4]. And laminitis is just one condition – there are many more associated with or, at the very least, exacerbated by, excess body fat, including hyperlipaemia, respiratory compromise, some strangulating colic lesions, reduced exercise tolerance and poor fertility [5]. In this issue of *EVJ*, Buckley and colleagues report that in horses and ponies the risk of owner-reported misbehaviour was increased in fat or obese animals [6]. This might provide some horse owners with a compelling reason to alter their management regimens, even if they are unconvinced by the health-related arguments. We have to continue to challenge the perceptions of weight and give owners the skills they need to effectively assess and manage the weight of their own horse.

The key to all these issues is the same – understanding the causes as well as the effects on horse welfare, and communicating these messages clearly to those who can effect change – principally horse owners, but also veterinarians, trainers, breeders and the show community. Sadly, this is very easy to state but incredibly complex to implement – but if we all work together towards this common aim, progress is possible.

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