Competition horses being medicated for chronic conditions – veterinary welfare considerations
FEEVA position paper – final draft for approval at the GA

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this position paper is for FEEVA to advocate for principles founded on safeguarding the welfare of competition horses when being medicated for chronic conditions. 'Competition horse' is defined here as 'an equid used in any equestrian sports or racing discipline across Europe'.

FEEVA recognises that veterinarians are subject to varying and sometimes conflicting pressures as they make decisions regarding the medicinal treatment of competition horses. Such pressures can arise from owners, clients, commercial interests and colleagues, influencing decisions made and the real-world consequences which then arise in this imperfect and ever-changing landscape. FEEVA also recognises that different laws apply and different standards are required by veterinary professional regulatory bodies in different countries across Europe; also that different rules apply for different equestrian and racing regulatory authorities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to comment on specific medicinal substances or critique the differing approaches that regulatory authorities take to their use during training or competition.

Despite but also because of the challenges facing equine veterinarians in their work, FEEVA believes that it is of value to offer support through describing ethics and welfare-focused principles that should apply to the treatment of competition horses with veterinary medicinal products.

Treating competition horses with chronic illness

All horses, including competition horses, suffer a variety of conditions, some of which require medicinal therapy following a veterinary diagnosis to ensure the health and welfare of the horse. Monitoring such diseases and medicinal treatments is challenging as horses cannot verbalise symptoms but may display physical and behavioural signs: communicating distress, discomfort and/or pain in a manner that is not always well recognised or understood by humans. Horses do not, and cannot, consent to engaging in competition activities; thus it falls to everyone responsible for the care of horses (e.g. owners, trainers, riders) to identify and safeguard their interests; veterinarians have an important and particular role in safeguarding the welfare of competition horses undergoing medication.

There is a risk that medication might cause adverse effects to the health and welfare of the horse under treatment, e.g. by causing the condition to worsen through athletic activity. Additionally, there is the risk of altering athletic performance by disguising clinical signs e.g. by temporarily reducing pain resulting in compromise to the horse's welfare, and skewing athletes' performance statistics, equine welfare incentives and future breeding decisions. Alternately, if medication prohibits the horse partaking in their current, lessor or any sporting activity, the horse's economic and emotional value to an owner and their welfare may be

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negatively affected; this consequence is not, however, the treating veterinarian's responsibility.

It is ultimately for the regulators of equine competition to ensure transparency, legal compliance and a level playing field while also safeguarding competition horse welfare for which owners/keepers hold ultimate responsibility. Veterinarians treating competition horses should prioritize the health and welfare of those horses under their care, including ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and advising on the continuation or discontinuation of activities for which the horse may remain physically and mentally fit.

PRINCIPLES

- As members of a regulated profession, veterinarians must remain free to treat competition horses under their care using their professional judgement and bearing in mind their obligation to safeguard the animal's health and welfare. They should also abide by the laws of the country they are practising in, and the requirements and ethical principles established by their professional regulatory authority.
- Horses are recognised as sentient beings both by the public and in law, with an increasing awareness and knowledge of equine welfare. Horses have an intrinsic value which should always be respected regardless of the purpose for which they are kept or used.
- The welfare of a horse used for competition should not be compromised through medication by the emotional, financial or other interests of stakeholders e.g. owners, keepers, riders, trainers, sponsors, gamblers, etc.
- Medication of horses should not be used with the sole or primary aim of protecting horses from future welfare concerns that might arise from them no longer being deemed suitable for competition purposes.
- Veterinarians bear a key responsibility to safeguard the welfare of animals, including competition horses, under their care and have a particular privileged position in relation to medicinal therapies. They properly use medicinal therapies to enhance the health and welfare of these horses.
- Prevention of illness, injury and disease e.g. via vaccination, where possible, is always preferable to relying on treatments. Similarly, practical improvements to correctable defects in a horse's environment, husbandry, training and competition type or level should be prioritised over allowing pathology to establish which might necessitate medicinal treatment.
- Medicinal treatments should be used to treat genuine clinical conditions and not to alter performance. Medicinal treatments should not be administered if an effect is to mask signs of illness or injury compromising the welfare of the horse; instead unless the horse should be withdrawn from competition for an appropriate period.
- Medicinal products should be used in accordance with their stated indications, evidence-based science, the veterinarian's judgement and in line with legislative principles that apply in the country concerned.
- National legislation regarding medication and national rules regarding the suitability of horses for competition will vary between European countries and must be observed. In

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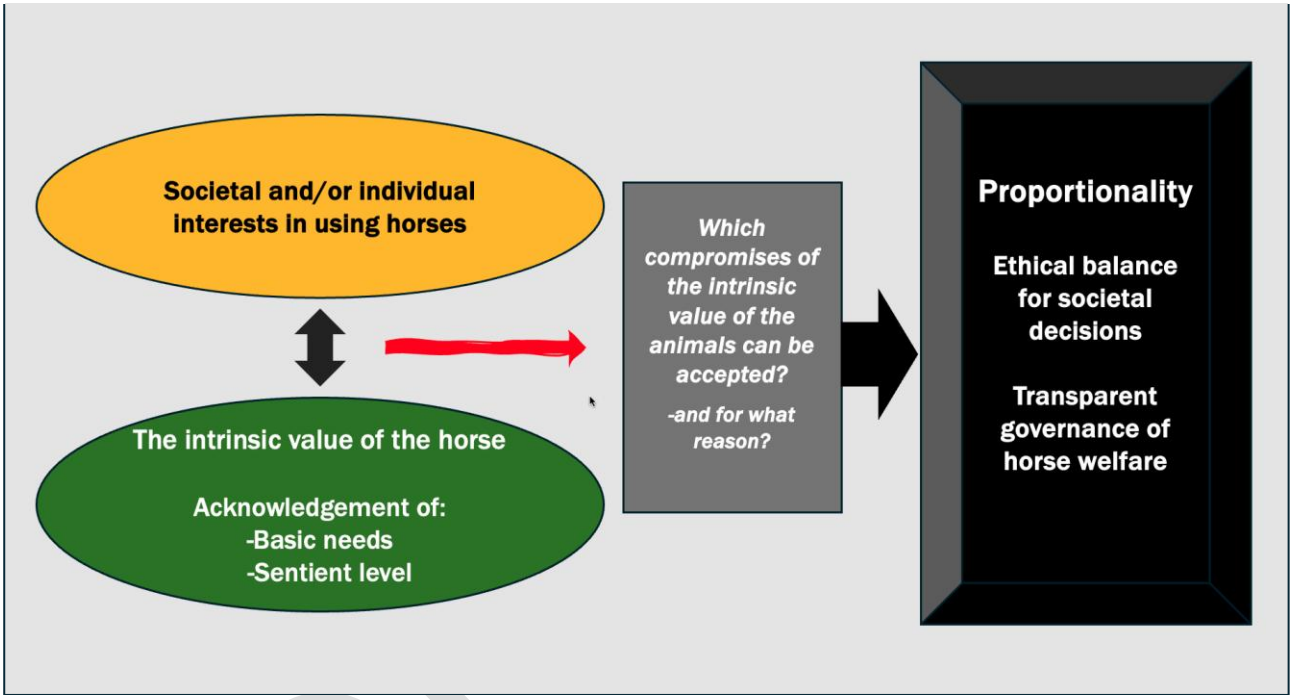
some instances these may be stricter than the principles established by international bodies, and must receive due consideration.

- Chronic conditions require regular, periodic and ongoing reassessment to determine whether medicinal treatment remains compatible with current use including competition or alternately whether retraining, repurposing or retirement should be considered.
- Diagnosis, treatment and prognosis should be properly documented and clearly communicated forming a comprehensive record regarding treatment rationale, risks and recommendations regarding continued competition especially where there is risk of conflict with safeguarding the horse's welfare.