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by barry irwin

OPEN LETTER TO RACETRACK VETS

I contend that every race day at every major racetrack in North America a trainer cheats by sending out a horse for competition in an illegally enhanced state.

I further assert that the foreign substance(s) used on their horse in most instances was not obtained or administered by the veterinarian overseeing the horse's welfare at the barn of the trainer.

Yet, if you ask race goers (be they horseplayers or fans) who they feel is responsible for filling horses full of illegal substances, the majority would finger the veterinarian.

Since vets are not the ones responsible for the preponderance of cheating taking place at American racetracks, why are they not leading the charge to clear up this misconception that paints them as the bad guys?

The answers to that question are myriad. Here are a few: 1) they want to maintain an ongoing business relationship with a particular trainer, 2) they want to keep alive the notion among clients that they might have some secret sauce of their own in their little "black bag" and 3) they want to fly below the regulatory morass without having to dirty their hands.

Racetrack vets have a singular focus: don't interrupt your income stream. Earnings for professional services rendered can be jeopardized by failing to comply with anything a trainer asks a vet to do and by encountering trouble from taking direct responsibility for a mistake with a regulatory body.

Given the state of play, it is nothing if not astonishing that yet another year is about to go by without racetrack vets taking a meaningful positive step to advance the cause of their patient--the Thoroughbred racehorse.

Racetrack vets earn income from the markup between the wholesale and retail cost of drugs, referrals to specialists or hospitals and by charging for diagnostics by use of their equipment, such as X-ray machines, ultra-sound scanners and endoscopes.

If they get paid (which is never a given), they make a good living. But because of the convoluted manner they choose to structure their income stream, they inherently feel vulnerable. So they never want the boat rocked.

In human medicine and in some rare instances on the backstretch, money is earned by charging a patient for services rendered. Physicians get paid for diagnosing ailments.

Doctors do not normally operate a pharmacy, which in essence is what racetrack vets do.

If vets changed their fee structure, charged for diagnoses and stopped operating a mobile pharmacy, they would be better off, their equine patients would be better off and the owners of the horses would be better off.

Think about it: if the greatest component of a vet's income is derived from selling drugs, do you think they are prone to writing more prescriptions for their patients?

Incentivizing vets to prescribe controlled substances in order to maximize their income stream is a formula for failure and added expense for horse owners.

(Some vets do charge for diagnoses, including the best known lameness vet on U. S. backstretches and nobody balks. But racetrack vets made a calculated mistake many years ago to offer free diagnoses in exchange for being able to mark up drugs in order to be compensated. It really behooves them to think about standardizing their fee structure to take them out of the pharmacy game.)

Back to my main question, which is "why vets do not try to elevate their professional standing above the cesspool of cheating trainers?" I think it is high time the racetrack members of the veterinary profession took a step to once and for all clear up the notion that cheating through PEDs (performance enhancing drugs) is a racetrack vet issue.

It seems inconceivable that any of the vets practicing at major racetracks in America went to vet school to become an equine practitioner in order to get rich. They studied, sacrificed and worked hard because they want to help horses.

I understand that working on the backstretch can lead vets to become jaded and callous, which can make them vulnerable to crossing the line. But these instances most assuredly would fall into the minority.

Being proud people that have sworn their allegiance to improving the lot in life of a racehorse, vets should want their families and peers to respect and admire them. But when cheating takes place at the racetrack each and every day and onlookers consider vets to be the source of the problem, it seems reasonable to assume that vets would want to stand up for themselves and their peers.

Yet, here we are. The AAEP (American Association of Equine Practitioners) has just finished yet another annual meeting and nothing has changed for the better.

So since they cannot seem to generate the inertia required to move their butts off the dime, I will offer them a suggestion to take a positive step in the right direction.

Somebody...ANYBODY...at the AAEP, come up with a plan to join with major racetracks in America to create on-track pharmacies for the sole purpose of giving confidence to horseplayers, fans, trainers and owners that the vets are not involved in administering any illegal substances to racehorses.

It is not for me to say how this will be funded or operated, but the basic premise goes something like this...if anything is found in the system of a horse that was not obtained from the on-track pharmacy and administered in a timely fashion, the veterinarian can no longer be held responsible.

This will shift the focus of cheating away from equine practitioners and squarely on to the trainers where it most assuredly belongs.

Rare is an instance of any vet administering a substance to a horse without the direction or permission of the trainer.

If, on the other hand, a vet is found to be responsible for a foreign substance being in the system of a horse on race day, his or her license should be suspended and or revoked, so that this individual is no longer dragging down the entire veterinary profession.

Honest, hard working vets should want crooked vets out of the system more than anybody else.

Yet...yet...here we are. It is nearly 2014 and the vets are more worried about having their income streams interrupted than doing something to protect their professional reputations.

Every honest owner and trainer reserve the top veterinarians. It is time for these stalwarts of their profession to take positive steps to remove any suspicion about their practices or motives.

Please, I urge you, take the initiative before somebody or some entity does it for you. In order to stop tongues from wagging, show that this game has the ability to take steps to improve the public perception of horse racing by providing a vehicle to end all of the suspicion.

Have feedback for publication? Email

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