

EQUINE WELLNESS

# EquineWELLNESS

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July/August 2009  
Display until August 11, 2009

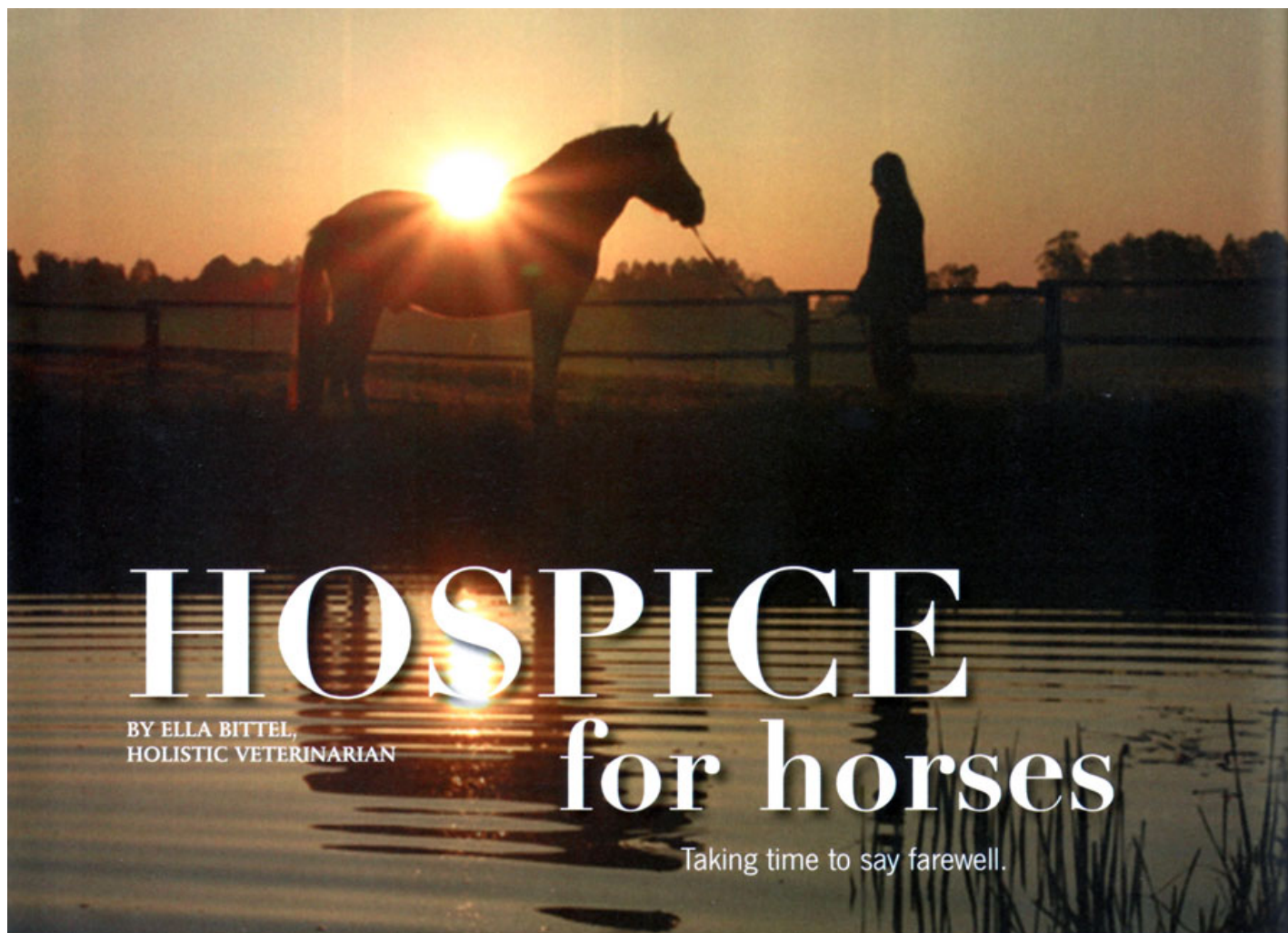
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VOLUME 4 ISSUE 4

EquineWellnessMagazine.com





# HOSPICE

BY ELLA BITTEL,  
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## for horses

Taking time to say farewell.

It's tempting to not think about it, yet so worthy of our attention well ahead of time. Your beloved horse's end-of-life stage holds a rich share of both challenge and beauty. The latter may come as a surprise to anyone unfamiliar with caring for a dying being. True, a lot of effort is involved on several levels, including physical, emotional, logistical, and possibly also financial. Yet those who choose to provide hospice care for their horses often find it a most precious, priceless part of their lives.

It's only been around for 40 years, but hospice care for humans has undergone striking advancements. In animal care, the concept is so new that it is yet to be officially defined, and horse owners and veterinarians are only starting to become aware of its existence and possibilities.

### GOALS OF HOSPICE CARE

A major goal of hospice care is to neither hasten nor prolong the dying process, while providing for the greatest

possible comfort of the dying individual. This requires that the horse's condition is correctly recognized as being terminal, and that medical goals are redirected from treatment for a cure to supportive or comfort care.

When a **life is at stake,**  
**what works is what counts.**

Euthanasia remains a last resort (for example in the case of uncontrollable pain). Hospice care instead recognizes that death is a natural part of the cycle of life, not a failed medical event, and does not have to be feared or avoided. The focus is "intensive caring" instead of "intensive care".

End-of-life care is almost always demanding, but when it comes to horses, their body size can add logistical

challenges to the equation that few have been willing to take on. Currently, most horses are euthanized months and even years before their life would end naturally if supportive or hospice care was successfully provided. Hospice care is for the dying, distinct from geriatric or special needs care. For instance, a horse unable to rise on his own due to arthritis has special needs, but physiologically is not close to dying. You may be able to count the ribs on a skinny horse with a saggy back but he may nonetheless be well taken care of and content. Remember that elderly people and animals both tend to lose much of their body weight toward the end of life. This can happen even in the presence of a hearty appetite.

### WHEN THE TIME COMES

Inside the dying process, the ability to digest food often wanes, and with it the desire to eat. This can stretch over a number of days. It is helpful to realize what we know from human hospice – that usually there is simply no more experience of hunger. Later on there may also be no more thirst, and much time may be spent just resting, with the focus of the horse wandering away from the “here”, no longer paying attention to us as he gets ready for his transition. None of these occurrences are unusual for the dying process or a reason to euthanize unless pain is present and cannot be controlled on an acceptable level.

Understanding the dying process can help us to not overreact, but instead provide a calm and peaceful environment for the horse.

While common patterns exist, the process of bringing a life to completion is a highly individual occurrence that can require more time than may be anticipated, especially by those unfamiliar with hospice. It may be challenging to fit into our schedules, yet giving hospice care is often experienced as a way to deepen the heartfelt bond we share with our horses, while at the same time allowing everyone involved to gradually prepare for the great change. This can greatly help ease the grieving process, as it tends to bring along a sense of completion after the horse's passing.

*Continued on next page.*

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ELLA BITTEL, A GERMAN VETERINARIAN WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN CALIFORNIA, HAS SPECIALIZED IN HOLISTIC TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR ANIMALS FOR OVER 20 YEARS. AMONG THE MODALITIES SHE OFFERS ARE VETERINARY ACUPUNCTURE, CHIROPRACTIC AND CRANIOSCRAL WORK, ALL INTERSPERSED WITH TTEAM/TTOUCH. EMAIL [LOVINGPLANET@VERIZON.NET](mailto:LOVINGPLANET@VERIZON.NET) OR CALL 805-688-2707



# PREVENTION IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

The three most common reasons for euthanasia in horses appear to be colic that's unresponsive to treatment, laminitis, and arthritis leading to an inability to rise. This points to preventive care being of critical significance when you consider its life sustaining value. It is essential to educate ourselves on how we can prevent or limit these diseases so our horses can live out their lives to the fullest.

## ARTHRITIS

Many of us bond with our four-legged companions so deeply that they are considered family members. As a result, it has become more and more common for dedicated dog lovers to continue to care for Rufus even if he can no longer get up on his own. If Rufus is a Chihuahua, this is lot easier than if he is a large breed dog, but in horses we are talking about hundreds of pounds surrendered to gravity. So when

you start noticing your horse is getting stiffer or the hind end weaker, take action – help is available.

Herbs and supplements, chiropractic, acupuncture and other treatment modalities can greatly increase the chances of a horse living long enough to make hospice a feasible option, possibly relieving you from having to make a heartbreaking decision to end the life of a horse who still happily eats and nickers a warm hello, yet needs help rising on certain mornings.

If even with our best support a horse is not able to rise on his own due to stiffness or weakness, it may still be possible with a couple of people to help him by supporting him on the halter as well as the tail.

## LAMINITIS

Laminitis can be due to various causes, but especially with its strong correlation to unsuitable feeding, it is a disease far easier prevented than treated.

- Overeating grass and grain remain common reasons for an acute onset of the disease. Keeping grains in locked containers and equipping feed room doors with a self-locking mechanism go a long way in keeping horses safe.

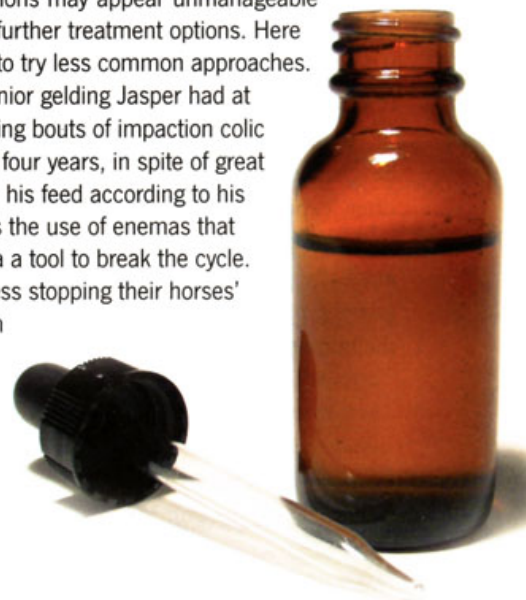
- Obesity in a horse is a great risk factor, but too low a body weight can also be present with chronic laminitis. Poor shedding, frequent drinking and urinating, as well as cresty necks or fat pads on the body count as classic signs of Cushing's disease. These can also be indicative of problems with glucose metabolism, which may play a part in bringing on and entertaining chronic laminitis.

- Corticosteroids as well as stress have been linked to pre-disposing a horse for laminitis.

In a suspect horse, keep checking his feet for heat and the intensity of the digital pulses, as icing of hooves and lower legs can be a very effective means to counteract a developing laminitis if caught early on. The chronic disease too may respond favorably to an individualized, comprehensive holistic treatment plan.

## COLIC

Colic in older horses may well be the number one cause for euthanasia. Surgery is often no longer feasible and even non-surgical situations may appear unmanageable in the absence of further treatment options. Here too it may pay off to try less common approaches. Helena Bresk's senior gelding Jasper had at times life threatening bouts of impaction colic over the course of four years, in spite of great efforts to fine-tune his feed according to his sensitivities. It was the use of enemas that finally gave Helena a tool to break the cycle. Others have success stopping their horses' colic episodes with essential oils or homeopathy. 🐾



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