

Owners' perceptions of quality of life in geriatric horses: a cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Quality of life (QoL) is increasingly recognised as a more important measure of treatment success than prolongation of life. Assessment of QoL may aid decision-making for treatment or euthanasia. This study aimed to evaluate owners' perceptions of factors affecting their horse's QoL and those factors that may contribute to their decision-making process for treatment or euthanasia of geriatric horses. A cross-sectional study was conducted, surveying a randomly selected sample of veterinary registered owners ($n = 1,144$) with horses aged ≥ 15 years, using a self-administered postal questionnaire. A section of this questionnaire contained 16 mixed-mode questions about the horse's QoL and factors influencing decisions on treatment. Horses from the cross-sectional survey were enrolled in a longitudinal study and, for cases of euthanasia, a further telephone questionnaire was completed to investigate factors influencing the owner's decision. Owners reported that the majority of geriatric animals enjoyed a high QoL, with 95% of owners rating their horse's QoL as good or excellent on an average day. However, increasing age corresponded negatively with many of the health-related QoL factors. Owners considered long-term diseases that cause chronic pain to affect their animal's QoL more than a disease causing a single episode of acute pain. The most important factors influencing choice of treatment options for a severe illness or injury were QoL after procedure, life-threatening disorders, painful/stressful procedures and veterinary advice. In conclusion, owner ratings and perceptions of factors affecting QoL of geriatric horses may prove useful in the development of a QoL assessment tool for ageing horses.

Keywords: animal welfare, euthanasia, geriatric, horse, survey, quality of life