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

Introduction

‘Quality of life’ (QoL) is a term used extensively in the field of healthcare; however, there has been a lack of consistency in the human and veterinary literature and many publications fail to define what is meant by QoL (Gill & Feinstein 1994; McMillan 2000; Eiser & Morse 2001; Scott et al 2007). In its simplest view, QoL may be regarded as one’s general enjoyment of life. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines human quality of life as follows:

an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept, incorporating in a complex way a person’s physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs and relationship to salient features of the environment (Saxena & Orley 1997).

In veterinary medicine, QoL is often considered synonymously with welfare (Wojciechowska et al 2005; Broom 2007; Taylor & Mills 2007). However, others suggest that the concept of QoL appears to have a different emphasis to welfare, in both its focus on subjective assessments and the presence of positive experiences (Sandoe 1996). McMillan (2003) proposed that QoL in animals is a balance between pleasant and unpleasant feelings. The Farm Animal Welfare Council recommend the use of both qualitative and quantitative judgements in order to classify an animal’s quality of life as a life not worth living, a life worth living or a good life, suggesting that this approach benefits from simplicity and encompasses both negative and positive experiences (Anon 2009).

A recent review proposed an alternative definition:

Quality of life is the state of an individual animal’s life as perceived by them at any one point in time. It is experienced as a sense of well-being, which involves the balance between negative and positive affective states and any cognitive evaluation of these, where the animal has the capacity. To some extent, QoL can be