

“Heard of HERDA?”

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You’ve been out of veterinary school for 5 years and you’ve been working as an associate doctor in a successful equine practice. You have interesting clients, mostly wonderful patients, and you enjoy working with the other doctors and staff in a well-established mixed animal practice. You live in a great community, you’ve started to raise a family and you’re on your way to paying off your educational loans. Life is good!

At least half of your equine client base includes owners of pleasure horses (Appaloosas, Paints and Quarter horses); another 30% are clients with show horses and hunter-jumpers, and 20% own/manage race horses. You are called out to a farm to do a pre-purchase exam on a healthy 2-year old, gelding Paint, named Rocket. The potential buyer, Theresa, wants to eventually show this horse. You conduct a thorough examination for lameness and measure the horse’s height. You also examine Rocket’s eyes, lungs, heart, mouth/teeth and intestinal tract. When Theresa asks you about a 3-inch lump on the horse’s rump, you hear the seller say that his vet looked at that bump about 5 months earlier and suspected that it was an old spider bite. You palpate the lump but cannot elicit any pain. It’s not hot or swollen either, so you conclude that it doesn’t appear to be anything to worry about.

Five months later, Theresa contacts you to report that Rocket has been diagnosed with hereditary equine regional dermal asthenia (HERDA), which is a hereditary skin disease for which there is no cure or effective treatment, and it renders affected horses unfit for riding. She insists that you should have identified this condition in time to prevent her from buying the horse. She did not insure the horse and after your practice manager makes a phone call for you, you learn that your insurance company is not going to pay anything either (unlike lameness conditions, HERDA is not a routine or commonly expected diagnosis). This client is asking you to compensate her for both the cost of the pre-purchase exam (\$350) and the cost of the horse (\$8,000).

Questions to consider and discuss:

- 1) What is HERDA and how does it impact Rocket’s welfare and life expectancy?
- 2) What is the impact of the diagnosis of HERDA on the owner, Theresa?
- 3) What are 3 or more possible choices of action that you could take?
- 4) Who are the stakeholders and what do they have to “win” or “lose”?
- 5) What are your obligations and to whom?
- 6) If you had unlimited funds, would you pay Theresa for her horse, Rocket? Why or why not?

Information for Instructors Using “Heard of HERDA?”

Uses for this case could include:

1. The case can be useful in conjunction with two of the lectures included in Module 1 of these materials:
 - a. Lecture 2: “Framework for Deliberation”—the listed questions can be used to model deliberative decision-making and to contrast it with debate-style argumentation.
 - b. Lecture 3: “Facilitating Moral Reasoning”—the listed questions can be used to elicit responses to some of the questions in Campbell’s Ethics Assessment Process.
2. There are diagnoses that a veterinarian is legally liable for missing, but others that they are not legally liable for missing.

Supplementary resources:

University of Minnesota Extensions Service article on HERDA:
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/agriculture/horse/health/herda/> states: “There is no cure or effective treatment, and these individuals are unusable as performance animals, therefore the majority of diagnosed horses are euthanized.”