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Photo credit: Terry Torrance

Horses in the Eagle Pass facility in Texas to be transported across the Mexican border for slaughter.

HORSE MEAT:

A Dangerous 'Delicacy'

by John Holland, President
Equine Welfare Alliance

Much has been said about the unintended consequences of stopping the slaughter of horses in the United States, but the consequences of continuing the slaughter have been all but ignored.

The problem is that our horses are not raised as food animals. That there will be serious consequences to continuing to use slaughter as a dumping ground for our horses is now becoming apparent.

Although the domestic horse slaughter plants have been closed since 2007, there has been no net decline in the number of US horses being slaughtered. The European firms simply moved their operations to Canada and Mexico.

Most of the meat from US horses is consumed in the EU (European Union), and the EU has been instituting new rules on the traceability of meat sold into its market. These rules will soon (by July 2013) have a major impact on US horses presented for slaughter.

The average slaughter horse is about 4 or 5 years old. Grandin[i] found 92.3% were sound with no behavioral issues, and USDA documents show that about 70% are Quarter Horses (rodeo and racing) and 16% are thoroughbreds (racing).

In other words, most of the US horses slaughtered are sport horses at the end of a very short career.

While all US horses receive a range of drugs that are prohibited in food animals, sport horses receive a far larger share because they often receive them prophylactically. So common is this usage that many race tracks require the daily racing card to show if a horse is racing on "bute" (phenylbutazone) and/ or Lasix (furosemide).

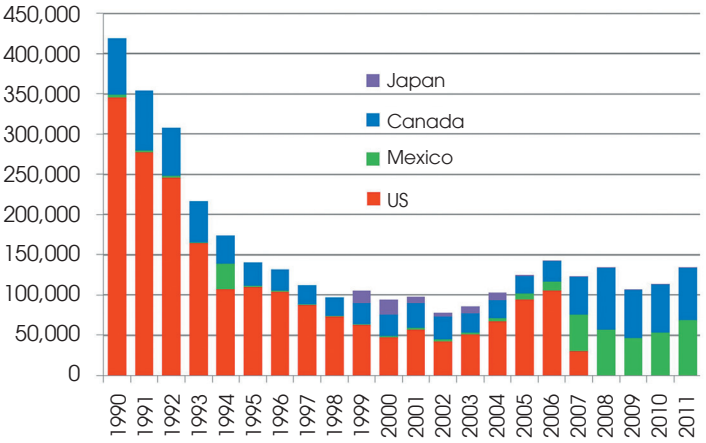
Phenylbutazone

Although it is only one of many dangerous drugs we give our equines, bute has become the poster child of the drug residue issue because it is so ubiquitous and so dangerous. A non-steroidal anti-inflammatory, bute is both cheap and effective in treating a range of equine conditions from joint and tendon injuries to hoof abscesses. Most of us have a tube or two of this "horse aspirin" tucked away in our feed room.

Bute was originally developed as a drug for humans until it was determined to have devastating carcinogenic properties. Bute causes bone marrow suppression leading to several potentially fatal disorders including aplastic anemia and leukemia as well as liver failure. An article in the Irish Veterinary Journal[ii] recently warned:

"If a child were to consume an animal-based product containing even the minutest amount of bute or its metabolite then the child may develop aplastic anemia."

Total US Horses Slaughtered by Country (USDA)



(ENDNOTES)

i *Survey of Trucking Practices and Injury to Slaughter Horses (Table 5), Dr. Temple Grandin, 1998*

ii *Phenylbutazone and its availability in Ireland – Prudent prescribing and dispensing, Irish Veterinary Journal Volume 63, Number 12, Peadar Ó Scanaill*

iii *USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, Horse Residue Testing, FOIA #07-53, 2007*

iv *Final Report of an Audit Carried out in Canada from 23 November to 06 December 2010, European Commission, DG(SANCO) 2010-8522*

v *Final Report of an Audit Carried out in Mexico from 22 November to 03 December, 2010, European Commission, DG(SANCO) 2010-8524*

Incredibly, horse meat is a very popular ingredient in Italian baby food!

Moreover, there is no withdrawal time for bute; it is simply banned by the EU and most western countries.

For years, the EU relied on the assurances of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that their testing program had found the meat of American horses to be 100% safe. In fact, the USDA printed a "blue book" of its test results every year and the results for hundreds of tests were always completely negative.

This, of course, did not pass the smell test for anyone who knew how commonly the drug is used and how quickly a horse can go from the stable to the slaughter house. In fact, a 2006 FOIA[iii] revealed the USDA was testing fat samples. Since fat has few blood vessels, and since bute does not take up in the fat itself, this assured negative results.

More damning was a reference to a pilot test that had been administered to two dozen carcasses in 2004 and 2005. That test found two carcasses (over 8%) were violative for phenylbutazone. The USDA then discontinued the new test and went back to testing fat!

Just a few of the common medications used on horses.

Equine Passports

The EU began its crackdown on drug residues over a decade ago by instituting a program called the Equine Passport System within its member countries. This program prohibited any horse from being presented for slaughter unless it had a passport and/or micro-chip implanted before it was six months old. This chip serves as an index into a master database used by all veterinarians.

By 2004, even Great Britain (not an EU member) had adopted the passport rules, saying that without doing so they would have lost access to 70% of their equine medications. Horse owners must decide if the horse will ever be eligible for slaughter. If so, no veterinarian can give the animal any prohibited substance and withdrawal times for other drugs are carefully checked.

In 2008, the European Commission sent a letter to countries outside the Union stating that they had three years to come into compliance on their own. In response, Canada and Mexico developed a voluntary compliance system based on an affidavit called the Equine Information Document.

Equine Information Documents (EIDs)

The EID is a form containing information about the equine's owner, the period over which he owned the horse, the horse's sex and identifying markings, and its drug history. The US auctions and kill buyers treated the document as a joke, having sellers simply sign them and filling them out on the way to the slaughter house.

In 2010, a paper appeared in the Elsevier journal *Food and Chemical Toxicology* by Dodman (DVM), Blondeau (MD/ PhD) and Marini (MD/ PhD) titled *Association of phenylbutazone usage with horses bought for slaughter; A public health risk.* The paper traced drug histories of 18 thoroughbred race horses sent to slaughter using racing records. All 18 were found to have been given bute, exposing the fact that there was absolutely no effective screening of US horses.

In 2011, the EU released the results of audits performed on the residue programs in both Canada[iv] and Mexico[v]. Although Mexico did not test for bute, prohibited substances were detected, including steroids. The report found no traceability for US horses beyond their point of origin, and horses with positive results were all accompanied by a falsified EID.

New Testing

Recently, documents have been surfacing that indicate that both Canada and the EU are improving meat sample testing methods from US horses. A July 27th report of frozen horse meat from Canada showed that phenylbutazone had been detected in three samples and clenbuterol in a fourth.

A July 9th warning letter from the FDA to a "kill buyer" named Ronald Andio shows the FDA has now become involved. The letter describes an FDA investigation of Andio's operation after a thoroughbred gelding that he sent to Canada for slaughter in August of 2011 was found to contain phenylbutazone residues. He was found to have falsified the horse's EID.

Moreover, Canada has now begun testing kidneys. This yields an increase in sensitivity of perhaps tenfold over testing muscle.

Legal Challenges

In March, HSUS and Front Range Equine Rescue filed a legal petition with the FDA asking that it block all companion, working, and show horses from slaughter for human consumption. The petition listed 110 drugs and substances commonly given these horses that would make them ineligible for human consumption.

Consequences

The EU continues to be confronted with the fact that voluntary declarations provide no useful information, and that our horses contain

prohibited drugs. Authorities have announced that they will require third countries (non-members) to reach the level of traceability found in member countries by July, 2013.

This will mean that if US horses are going to continue to be sent to slaughter for the EU, we as horse owners will have to accept a program like the Equine Passport, or we will lose most of our effective medications, or both. Worse, the days of owners administering drugs will be over. Each dose of a drug will require a veterinarian on site, greatly increasing our costs.

In other words, most of the US horses slaughtered are sport horses at the end of a very short career.

About the author:
John M. Holland, President Equine Welfare Alliance Mr. Holland holds an electrical engineering degree from Virginia Tech (1968), and works as an industrial consultant specializing in the design of intelligent automation and knowledge based systems. He holds 12 patents and is the author of three books, including *"Designing Autonomous Mobile Robots; Inside the mind of an intelligent machine"*. Holland brings his love of data and analytics, as well as his lifelong experience with equines, to his volunteer work with the Alliance. Holland has published dozens of studies on equine welfare issues. These include three statistical studies of the relationship between the rates of horse slaughter and cases of abuse and neglect, and a recent study on stress factors facing horse owners.

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