

EQUINE WELFARE - ENDURANCE RIDING

CHAPTER 5

ENDURANCE RIDING

Introduction

5.1 Endurance riding is a competitive horse ride of at least 80 kilometres where the winner is the horse and rider that successfully completes the ride in the shortest time.¹

5.2 The Australian Endurance Riders Association (AERA) was formed in 1967 and has established Riding Rules and Veterinary Standards for the conduct of endurance rides. In 1981, State divisions were formed to manage the sport in each State with AERA having overall co-ordinating control. The membership of AERA totals 2,500 nationally². The sport is most popular in New South Wales and Queensland.³

5.3 Currently, there are over 5,000 horses involved in endurance rides. The competitive life of endurance horses varies from three to ten years, but horses do not commence competition before the age of 6. Some horses may continue in competition until they are 16 years of age. No whips or spurs are permitted during endurance rides.

5.4 AERA told the Committee that endurance riding is conducted under stringent veterinary and other rules. The Association stated that the Riding Rules, Procedures for Rides and Veterinary Standards are "constantly being updated", with the "main criteria" being the "welfare of the horse".⁴

5.5 The Rules of the Association emphasise the welfare of the competing horse. All endurance rides are under the control of a veterinarian. Any decision by the veterinarian on the fitness of a horse to compete or continue competing is final.

5.6 Veterinarians examine all competing horses before the ride commences. The horses must be properly shod, in good health and free of lameness before they are allowed to compete. During the ride, there are a number of compulsory stops for the veterinarian to re-examine the horses. At the first inspection point, the veterinarian examines the horses 30 minutes after they cross the line. The veterinarian will eliminate from further competition horses with heart rates above 55 beats per minute

(BPM) or horses that appear lame at the trot. At all subsequent inspection points, heart rates must be below 60 BPM and the horse must not exhibit any signs of lameness.

5.7 Dr Christopher Pollitt, Senior Lecturer, Department of Companion Animal Medicine and Surgery, University of Queensland, explained the overriding philosophy behind the rules relating to veterinary supervision. He stated:

The veterinary surgeon's primary responsibility is to protect the health and welfare of the endurance horse and he is made to realise that that is his reason for being there ... What the veterinary surgeon does is to consider this fundamental welfare tenet at all times during an endurance ride: Is the horse fit to continue in the endurance ride without compromise to its welfare?⁵

5.8 Dr Pollitt indicated that the goal of the endurance rider is to complete the ride and "the motto of endurance riding is 'To complete is to win'".⁶ He added:

Endurance riding is the only horse sport in Australia, or even the world, where a competitor, even after crossing the finishing line, is eliminated if the horse has not passed the [veterinary] criteria.⁷

Views on Endurance Rides

5.9 In general, animal welfare organisations did not identify major problems associated with endurance riding. For example, RSPCA Australia advised the Committee that it "is not opposed in principle to the conduct of Endurance Rides when carried out under strictly supervised conditions".⁸ The Society considers that the following conditions are necessary:

- that only suitable, trained and fit horses should be allowed to compete;
- experienced veterinary surgeons are engaged to examine all horses entered immediately prior to their acceptance and to regularly monitor each horse throughout the event. Such

veterinary examinations should be conducted strictly in accordance with published criteria set by the Australian Equine Veterinary Association; and

- no competitor should permit a horse to be exposed to unnecessary or excessive stress.⁹

5.10 RSPCA (NSW) cautioned that endurance riding has the "potential to cause serious welfare problems as it effectively pushes horses to their physical limits". The State Branch, however, indicated that it condones these events subject to the controls laid down by RSPCA Australia.¹⁰

5.11 ANZFAS did not address specifically the issue of endurance riding. In evidence to the Committee, however, Dr John Auty, a member of the Federation, made the following general observation:

I would say, having had discussions with veterinary colleagues about this, that those [endurance riding] events are probably the best conducted competitive horse events of all, because they have got a very big veterinary input; the training has to be over such a period, extended training; the animals are mature; and so on and so forth.¹¹

Equine Fatalities

5.12 The Committee was surprised that submissions and other evidence did not address the issue of fatalities in endurance riding. Indeed, it was only after questioning from the Committee that this important matter was raised.

5.13 In response to questions from the Committee, the Australian Endurance Riders Association commented that in Australia over the last fifteen years, 25 horses have died in endurance rides.¹² Nine of these deaths occurred in 1990.¹³ According to the Association's evidence, 40 per cent of the deaths were caused by "exhausted horse syndrome". Representatives of the Association agreed with the proposition that these deaths were caused primarily by the abuse of horses by riders.¹⁴ Twenty-five per cent of deaths resulted from broken legs or other injuries, 25 per cent from worm damage and 10 per cent were unknown.¹⁵

5.14 Subsequent information requested by the Committee from the Association indicated that 34 horse deaths have occurred nationally since 1976. Of these, 24 occurred in New South Wales, 4 each in Queensland and Victoria and one each in South Australia and Tasmania. No deaths have been recorded in Western Australia.¹⁶

5.15 The Committee also questioned the Association on whether death rates are increasing because rides are too difficult. Mr John Innes, National President of AERA, replied:

We are not making the rides harder. We are making the completion criteria harder, but not the rides. It is harder for that horse to get through by the criteria of the completion, but not the ride. The rides are exactly the same. We are just making it harder for the horses to get through.¹⁷

Conclusions

5.16 The Committee considers that the number of horse fatalities resulting from endurance riding is unacceptable. The Committee's concerns are heightened by the fact that proponents of the sport emphasise the nature and extent of veterinary supervision in these events.

5.17 In the Committee's view, the Australian Endurance Riders Association, as a matter of urgency, must introduce procedures, including more stringent veterinary controls, to safeguard the welfare of horses in endurance riding. The Committee recognises that endurance riding is becoming more popular and therefore an increasing number of riders and horses are participating in the sport. The Committee therefore, is adamant that further controls are necessary to avoid the increasing number of fatalities.

5.18 In the following sections of this chapter, the Committee draws conclusions about specific reforms to endurance riding that may improve the welfare of the horses involved in this event.

Reducing Equine Fatalities

5.19 During public hearings, the Committee questioned witnesses on ways in which the welfare of horses in endurance rides might be improved. The matters raised at these hearings relate to:

- novice and unfit horses;
- training rides;
- rider education;
- cardiac recovery index (CRI); and
- veterinary supervision.

Novice and Unfit Horses

5.20 The Committee questioned representatives of the Australian Endurance Riders Association on possible reasons for the significant increase in the number of deaths in endurance riding. Dr Christopher Walker, Honorary Veterinarian with the Association, replied that novice horses are at most risk. Dr Walker explained:

In addressing this problem, we have been able to identify the horses that are dying are not the elite horses. [The elite horses] are not our concern. Nor are they the horses at the tail of the field that are just going around trail riding. It appears [that] the horses at risk are the novice horses, new to the sport who have not demonstrated capacity to be an endurance horse, ridden by experienced riders - in other words, riders who do not have to ride behind the pace rider ... Those novice horses seem to be the group that we are having problems with.¹⁸

5.21 The Committee also raised the related issue of unfit horses competing in endurance rides. The Committee noted that the completion rate for endurance rides is about 65 per cent.¹⁹ The Committee questioned whether this indicated that horses are not fit enough to compete or that they are not ridden properly.

5.22 Mr Innes, National President of AERA, conceded that this view was in part correct. He noted:

As far as the 65 per cent goes, you are partially correct in that some of the horses are not fit enough. That is the whole reason we have a very strict veterinary control.²⁰

5.23 Mr George Sample, National Delegate to the Association, told the Committee that completion rates are satisfactory. He explained:

I would like to emphasise that our standards are designed in order to detect the horses before they run into trouble - not to eliminate the horses that are in trouble, but to eliminate the ones before they run into trouble. I think that is why you will find that a 65 per cent finishing, completion rate - it might sound low - to us is quite high, because those standards are designed to eliminate the horse before it runs into physiological problems.²¹

5.24 Representatives of the Association suggested that there are several reasons why horses do not complete rides. These include withdrawals and elimination, or "vet-outs" as they are called, on account of lameness or excessive pulse rate.²²

5.25 In relation to lameness, Mr Innes noted that it is the major cause of vet-outs. According to Mr Innes, the incidence of lameness has "nothing to do with fit horses or bad riding".²³ Dr Walker advised that most cases of lameness are "significant" and are usually caused by a kick or fall. Most horses, however, recover quickly and are able to compete again in 2 or 3 weeks.²⁴

5.26 In relation to elimination because of excessive pulse rate, Mr Innes advised that the incidence of "pulse vet-outs" is decreasing. He suggested that this trend indicates that horses are fitter.²⁵

Conclusions

5.27 The Committee is of the view that only suitable, properly trained and fit horses should compete in endurance rides. In particular, the Committee considers that the Australian Endurance Riders Association, and its affiliates, must introduce measures to protect the welfare of horses new to the sport. These measures could include the establishment of categories of competition based on the novice horse rather than the novice rider. Novice horses should be required to demonstrate a capacity

consistent with endurance riding before being allowed to compete in more advanced categories of competition.

Training Rides

5.28 Training rides are conducted over distances ranging from 40 to 60 kilometres and are governed by the Rules of the Endurance Riders Association. Veterinary procedures for training rides are more stringent than normal competitions. A horses' heart rate must be below 55 beats per minute at all veterinary checks.

5.29 The Association conducts short training rides under tight veterinary regulation to initiate new riders and juniors into the sport. Dr Pollitt explained:

Competitors are encouraged just to get their horses through these training rides in a comfortable state. They are not encouraged to compete against each other.²⁶

5.30 Dr William Harbison, an honorary veterinarian with the Association, also maintains that these rides play an important role in educating new riders as riders gain valuable experience seeing more experienced people in action. Dr Harbison advised the Committee that in 1990, AERA widened its rules to cover short rides. It also has developed a specific set of rules to address these types of rides.

5.31 Some animal welfare organisations suggested that there are problems with short endurance rides. For example, the New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council noted that these rides tend to attract more unfit horses and inexperienced riders.²⁷

Conclusions

5.32 The Committee recognises that training rides provide a useful means of educating new riders and horses into endurance riding.

5.33 It is, therefore, appropriate that these rides are conducted under strict supervision and control and that veterinary standards should be more stringent than in competitive rides.

5.34 The Committee calls on the Australian Endurance Riders Association to review the rules relating to training rides and, in particular, veterinary standards, in order to ensure that the welfare of horses involved in these events is not compromised.

Rider Education

5.35 AERA conducts educational promotions to raise the level of rider education. Dr Pollitt advised the Committee of the Association's activities in this area. He stated:

We have a bi-monthly newsletter that goes out to all the members of the Association and we conduct seminars to raise the awareness of riders and veterinarians about how their horses perform, the reasons for high heart rates and the reasons for metabolic stress with the aim of helping people to keep their horses working and competing in the sport in the most comfortable manner possible.²⁸

5.36 Some contributors to the inquiry, including NSW AWAC and Dr Harbison maintain that more needs to be done to promote rider education.²⁹ This education process should familiarise riders with problems that may occur during rides, including the risk of injuries and measures to reduce these risks.

5.37 Dr Harbison expressed the view that there has been a recent increase in the competitiveness of riders. He observed that " the achievement of completion has been less important, and winning the ride, that is, being first across the line is the sought after goal".³⁰ This was another reason to stress the importance of rider education.

5.38 The Committee received practical suggestions on ways to improve the skills and approach of riders. For example, the NSW AWAC suggests that organising committees provide riders, particularly those with limited experience, with a guide on minimum completion times for the course or sections of the course.³¹ NSW AWAC also considers that riders should be required to declare that they " are in possession of, and familiar with AERA rules".³²

Conclusions

5.39 The Committee considers that riders should have a thorough knowledge of all aspects of endurance riding and, in particular, a keen appreciation of the physical demands the event places on horses.

5.40 The Committee is of the view that injuries and fatalities will be reduced if riders are knowledgeable and skilful. The Committee, therefore, encourages the Australian Endurance Riders Association to give priority to programs that promote the education of riders in endurance events. The Committee also encourages the Association to consider the practical suggestions on rider education noted in this report.

Cardiac Recovery Index

5.41 The Committee was told that the Association has developed an Early Warning System that collates and monitors the riding performance of all competitors at all rides throughout the country. The system is designed to highlight competitors eliminated frequently and the incidence of horse stress not resulting in death or serious injuries. Officiating committees may penalise competitors who are proven to override or stress their horses. Penalties include counselling, demotion to novice status and disqualification.³³

5.42 Dr Pollitt advised the Committee that equine deaths could be reduced if an improved stress test, called the Cardiac Recovery Index, were used in Australia. This test is mandatory at all international endurance rides and is used extensively at endurance rides in North America. According to Dr Pollitt, veterinary surgeons incorporating the CRI into their examination procedures are confident that they can detect "undue" stress with more sensitivity.³⁴

5.43 Dr Pollitt explained to the Committee how the test works. He stated:

In Australia we wait 30 minutes before the veterinarians examine the horses; then their heart rates are taken. If the heart rates are below 55 at the first check and then 60 at the second and subsequent checks, the horses are considered unstressed. Then the horses are examined for lameness. The cardiac recovery index is used in Europe and America... There the horses have to be below 64 beats per minute

throughout the ride, ... But then, when the index is applied, the heart rate is taken, the horse is trotted out 60 metres and back and then the heart rate is taken again; there is a wait of one minute; if the heart rate rises, the horse is considered stressed and could be eliminated. If the recovery index is as high or higher at subsequent checks, the horse is eliminated.³⁵

5.44 Dr Pollitt explained that tests currently used in Australia detect lameness more effectively but the CRI is more sensitive to metabolic stress. He conceded that horse deaths are a major problem in Australia and made the following observation:

We might have to concentrate more on the metabolic aspects, and live with the lameness aspects, if we are going to do something about deaths".³⁶

5.45 Mr Sample, also appearing on behalf of AERA, suggested that a combination of tests may be necessary. He stated:

We believe quite strongly that our method of checking the horse after it has been half an hour into the vet check produces a result that was the best one for Australia. We are now looking at the possibility of combining the cardiac recovery index with our half-hour vet check to see if we can further improve the standards that we have".³⁷

Conclusion

5.46 The Committee notes that the Cardiac Recovery Index is used at international endurance riding competitions and extensively in North America. The Committee considers that the Australian Endurance Riders Association should investigate the feasibility of introducing this test into veterinary procedures at endurance rides conducted in Australia.

Veterinary Supervision

5.47 As indicated previously, all endurance rides are under the control of a veterinarian whose decision on the fitness of a horse to compete is final.

5.48 RSPCA Australia advised the Committee that the veterinary parameters for endurance rides are "adequate". However, the Society noted that the welfare of competing horses could be compromised if veterinary surveillance is not strict and meticulous.³⁸

5.49 RSPCA (NSW) also supports veterinarian checks as a means of detecting and treating problems as they may arise.³⁹ Likewise, NSW AWAC favour these veterinarian procedures.⁴⁰

5.50 It was suggested to the Committee that some veterinarians officiating at events are not familiar with endurance riding.⁴¹

5.51 Dr Walker, Honorary Veterinarian with AERA, recognised this problem but assured the Committee that the situation has improved in recent years. Dr Walker added:

I think it was harder to get veterinarians in the years gone by and often they relied upon the University of Sydney or the University of Queensland to provide their clinical staff and students accompanying them. Nowadays the local equine or mixed practice tends to service the local endurance ride and it is done on a professional paid basis. That has done a lot to encourage veterinarians to come forward.⁴²

5.52 In written responses to Committee questions, Dr Harbison, an honorary veterinarian with the Association, recognised that "some of the recent ride fatalities may have been in part due to inexperience on the part of the veterinarian".⁴³

5.53 Dr Harbison noted that in the past the position of supervising veterinarians at endurance rides has "been largely honorary".⁴⁴ He welcomed the recent trend towards paying for services and added that if reasonable fees are paid "reasonable service" can be expected.

5.54 Dr Harbison suggested that the increase in deaths at rides could be attributed to recent reductions in veterinary supervision. He explained:

There has been pressure from within the endurance riding fraternity to bring our rules into line with other countries and to allow Australian competitors to get used to the rules under which they would ride in international competition. Not all

people involved agreed with this trend as they felt that our recent good record was due to the very tight veterinary control.⁴⁵

5.55 To assist veterinarians at endurance rides, NSW AWAC suggests that riders should be required to carry a book containing details of every ride attempted. Information contained in the book could include the age and description of the horse, resting and recovery heart rate, ride distance and reason for any disqualifications. Details could be completed and signed by the supervising veterinarian at each ride. According to NSW AWAC, this information would assist veterinarians in the early recognition of potential problems.⁴⁶

Conclusions

5.56 The Committee acknowledges that the arrangements for veterinary control of endurance rides recognise the need to safeguard the welfare of the horse.

5.57 The Committee endorses the view that the rules on veterinary supervision and control must be enforced strictly. The Committee considers that wherever possible events should be supervised by veterinarians familiar with endurance rides.

Statistics on Fatalities

5.58 The Committee notes that the Australian Endurance Riders Association has instituted a recording and investigation procedure to monitor fatalities in rides. Thorough investigations are conducted, including post-mortems and reports from supervising veterinarians and ride stewards. If necessary, this information is investigated by the relevant State association and referred on to the national body.

Conclusions

5.59 The Committee considers that the Australian Endurance Riders Association, and its State affiliates should collect and maintain a register of statistics on fatalities and major injuries to horses involved in endurance rides.

5.60 *The Committee recommends that all State and Territory Governments require statistics on fatalities and major injuries to be lodged annually with the relevant Department responsible for animal welfare. This will enable the responsible authority to monitor the welfare of animals involved in this sport.*

Research

5.61 Several contributors to the inquiry stressed the need for further research into endurance riding.⁴⁷ For example, Dr Pollitt informed the Committee that currently the School of Veterinary Science at the University of Queensland is undertaking research into the exercise physiology of endurance horses.⁴⁸ This research aims to define the attributes of successful competitive endurance horses. Dr Pollitt noted:

The results are expected to identify the characteristics of those horses which regularly fail to pass the veterinary criteria at endurance rides and prevent them being subjected to the stress of futile further training. This research is under funded and deserves a higher priority than it currently receives.⁴⁹

5.62 Mr Sample, a member of the Australian Endurance Riders Association, indicated that further research needs to be done on horses in sport. He observed:

We look for more research than has been the case in the past because we acknowledge endurance riding to be a very special field of equine sport endeavour. Without research we cannot continue to make the progress that has been made in the past. We would like to see more progress made.⁵⁰

5.63 Dr Harbison noted that the medical problems of horses competing in endurance rides are different from those associated with other equine sports. Dr Harbison identified specific areas requiring more research. These include exercise physiology, the diagnosis of "exhausted horse syndrome" and appropriate treatments for emergency situations.⁵¹

Other Issues

5.64 Two other issues relating to animal welfare were raised in evidence during the course of the inquiry on endurance riding. These issues relate to de-nerved horses and the use of prohibited drugs.

De-nerved Horses

5.65 Neurectomised horses have had nerves removed from hooves and legs with the resulting loss of sensation. The Committee was advised of at least one instance when a "de-nerved" horse participated in an endurance ride. In this case, the horse was banned from competing in endurance rides. However, no action was taken against the rider.⁵²

5.66 Dr Pollitt, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Queensland, informed the Committee that the welfare of de-nerved horses is threatened as many parts of its foot are numb. This loss of sensation may cause injuries or exacerbate pre-existing conditions. In relation to endurance riding, a de-nerved horse, without a warning signal of pain, will continue to perform.

5.67 The Committee understands that the Australian Endurance Riders Association is considering placing a ban on horses that have been de-nerved.⁵³ The Committee supports a ban on neurectomised horses from participating in endurance rides.

Drug Use

5.68 The rules of the Australian Endurance Riders Association prohibit the use of certain drugs.⁵⁴

5.69 The Association is authorised to ban riders from competition for up to twelve months if their horses are found to have competed under the influence of prohibited substances. Urine and blood swabs are collected at major endurance rides. All riders must submit their horses for a drug test or risk suspension.⁵⁵

5.70 Representatives of the Endurance Riders Association assured the Committee that there were no major problems with the use of prohibited drugs in endurance riding.⁵⁶

ENDNOTES

1. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p.573.
2. *ibid.*, p. 584; p. 590.
3. *ibid.*, p. 593.
4. *ibid.* p. 548.
5. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, pp. 528-29.
6. *ibid.*, p. 534.
7. *ibid.*, pp. 533-4.
8. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p 128.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 128-9.
10. *Evidence*, RSPCA New South Wales, pp. 329-30.
11. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 180.
12. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p. 596.
13. *ibid.*, pp. 596-7.
14. *ibid.*, p. 596.
15. *ibid.*
16. *Correspondence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, 24 July 1991, pp. 1-2; p. 7.
17. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, pp. 603-4.
18. *ibid.*, p. 598.
19. *ibid.*, p. 601.
20. *ibid.*
21. *ibid.*, p. 603.

22. *ibid.*, p. 602.
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.*
25. *ibid.*
26. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, p. 534.
27. *Evidence*, New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council, p. 271.
28. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, pp. 535-6.
29. *Evidence*, New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council, p. 273.
Correspondence, Dr W. Harbison, 15 May 1991, p. 8.
30. *Correspondence*, Dr W. Harbison, 15 May 1991, p. 8.
31. *Evidence*, New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council, p. 273.
32. *ibid.*, p. 273.
33. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p. 548.
Correspondence, Dr W. Harbison, 15 May 1991, p. 5.
34. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, p. 513.
35. *ibid.*, pp. 541-2.
36. *ibid.*, p. 542.
37. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p. 586.
38. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 128.
39. *Evidence*, RSPCA New South Wales, p. 331.
40. *Evidence*, New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council, p. 272.
41. *Correspondence*, Dr W. Harbison, 15 May 1991, p. 6.

- Evidence*, New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council, p. 272.
42. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p. 600.
 43. *Correspondence*, Dr W. Harbison, 15 May 1991, p. 6.
 44. *ibid.*, p. 6.
 45. *ibid.*, p. 4.
 46. *Evidence*, New South Wales Animal Welfare Advisory Council, pp. 272-3.
 47. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p. 586.
Evidence, Dr C. Pollitt, p. 513.
 48. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, pp. 512-3.
 49. *ibid.*
 50. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, pp. 586-7.
 51. *Correspondence*, Dr W. Harbison, 15 May 1991, p. 6.
 52. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, pp. 537-8.
 53. *Evidence*, Australian Endurance Riders Association, p. 537.
 54. *ibid.*, p. 554.
 55. *Evidence*, Dr C. Pollitt, p. 512.
 56. *ibid.*