

# Disease Du Jour Podcast Episode 60 Veterinarians and Equine Welfare Dr. Clara Mason Transcript

## COMMERCIAL

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## END COMMERCIAL

**Kim Brown:** Welcome to this episode of Disease Du Jour on the topic of Veterinarians and Equine Welfare with Dr. Clara Mason.

Dr. Mason is a solo ambulatory practitioner in Winfield, West Virginia, and she serves as the AAEP representative to the AVMA's Animal Welfare Committee. She's presented on the topic of prosecuting cases of equine abuse at the AAEP annual convention, and while a member of AAEP's Welfare and Public Policy Advisory Council was part of a team that in 2018 created comprehensive online resources to help members work with clients and law enforcement to prevent equine abuse and neglect. She's a graduate of Mississippi State University's vet school.

Dr. Mason was named AAEP's "Good Works" recipient for August 2019. Her commitment to at-risk horses in West Virginia has strengthened animal cruelty laws in that state and increased enforcement of equine cruelty and neglect cases.

I'm your host Kim Brown publisher of EquiManagement.

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Welcome Dr. Mason.

**Dr. Clara Mason:** Hey, thank you, Kimberly, for having me on this podcast.

**Kim Brown:** [00:01:39] Well, we sure appreciate you coming and sharing some of your experience with us.

Let's just start out with, can you tell me about maybe one incident where you were involved in an equine rescue?

**Dr. Clara Mason:** Yes. So, I moved to West Virginia in 1993. And though the laws in West Virginia are very good and they were a little bit, you know, ahead of everyone state-wise as having responsible laws. And you could certainly get your case to court if it was necessary. The unfortunate problem in 1993 was that the rescues, which there were very few of, the

local shelters and some of the law enforcement were just sort of out there unaware of how to get these cases from the field to the courtroom.

And most of the time it was reflective of the fact that they were not knowledgeable or educated or instructed on what is a skinny. What is an abuse. What is a neglected horse or what is just typical for the breed and we're misunderstanding it.

So, it's through the first few years when I moved here, there were a few cases, three horses here, two horses there.

Most of the time, it was a neglectful situation. And then in the beginning of 2010, I got a panic phone call. From a county that is located on the border of West Virginia and Kentucky. And it's a little rural out there, but someone had neglected or abused 58 horses. They were starving. The pasture was denuded. They had no vet care. Some of the mares were aborting without even going into a natural labor. They simply were walking away and losing their pregnancy and all because the animals were starved. So they contacted me.

But this is an enormous amount of horses for one veterinarian to take on and have to take to court. And they had a myriad of problems health wise, everything from minor dermatitis and some hoof issues to Pigeon fever, to colic. Again, we had almost storm abortions, not due to a bacteria or an infectious agent, but rather just a neglectful situation where the mare did not have enough calories to support the pregnancy.

So, when I was called in our state did not have the resources to manage this. It was just too large. So, the Humane Society of the United States came in, ASPCA came in and some other umbrella groups beneath both the Humane Society and the ASPCA. And my little practice of two technicians and I were able to process all of these horses and get them the proper care and start medicating them.

And then we found a local fairground that was able to allow these horses to live there as they recuperated or were treated.

It was a massive undertaking, and I had never taken on anything that large. Unfortunately, again, we ran into the one problem, which we recognize there's a problem. We're treating the horses. We are, you know, putting them in a better light, you know, they're having some pasture to graze. They're receiving medications, but yet, how do we prosecute or at least, you know, bring the gentleman that had these horses to court.

So, that was a challenge because the shelters were not skilled in how to do this.

So, this is where I realized that we need to do something as veterinarians to not allow these cases to slip by. Because we are the advocate for the horse. And if we don't speak for the horse, who will? So, I realized then that my best approach to dealing with these cases is to go straight to the prosecutor.

And many times animal abuse cases take a back seat. Obviously, there's bigger problems in the world right now with murders and all of that. I get that. But many times animal abuse and human abuse—whether it's a child or elder abuse—can run hand in hand.

So, I went to the prosecutor and really just, you know, sat down with pictures, diagrams, you know, whatever they needed and preached to them until I maybe gave them some confidence—for lack of a better word—that they could go into the courtroom and go with this case.

And, it was a challenge. It took us months. Everything worked out well. The man was found guilty and of course he was denied pet ownership for five years, which it took less than a year before he unfortunately broke that rule and took in more horses and dogs.

But, the county at that point was prepared to deal with him. And this sort of gave them the levy to go forward with other cases like this, because this was just a large case that was all over the news. You know, went into Kentucky as well as West Virginia, and it was high-profile. But I knew that if we didn't handle this case properly, we would never get a smaller case of one or two horses to the courtroom.

So, it really worked out well. And I'm extraordinarily grateful for the national organizations like the ASPCA and the Humane Society and some of the other ones. They took their time and sent shelter workers to us. And they would live, you know, here in West Virginia for a few weeks and help take care of these horses. Cause otherwise we would have lost most of this herd.

So, that was really the impetus that got me started on this because I realized that equine neglect and abuse ... albeit we're more savvy with it, meaning that we recognize it. We know what a skinny horse looks like. You know, we have toolkits to help us with this.

And even though we're there and possibly we're not seeing as many abuse cases as we saw a few years ago, we are still seeing them and they still, the horses still need attention.

**Kim Brown:** And I believe that you got an award from the HSUS for all of your hard work on this?

**Dr. Clara Mason:** I was the only veterinarian in the country that year in 2010 ... they awarded me the Humane Recognition Award. And it was presented to me in Washington, D.C. And it really was unexpected and very much appreciated. It makes me smile when I see that award, because I know how hard all the teams worked, whether they were national or just my small staff.

We really, really put forth the effort to save those horses.

And I still see some of those horses through the practice occasionally, and they look great. Some of them are just as sassy as they can be, you know? Full belly and attitude. But, I probably see maybe 20% of the horses from that rescue.

**Kim Brown:** So, how can equine veterinarians get involved in welfare? I mean, how is it that usually a veterinarian is brought into one of these situations?

**Dr. Clara Mason:** Well, basically, if you haven't done any equine rescue work, you're usually called upon when there's a horse that's either in question, you know—is this horse being

neglected—or if there's been egregious abuse. And so you usually get a phone call from a shelter worker, a director, occasionally law enforcement that says I need help.

I had one of those last week. So, the law enforcement, the main worker, he said, you know, I can tell you a skinny dog or a skinny cat from a hundred yards. He said that I have no idea if this horse is skinny or not. And the horse's body condition score was a one. So clearly, he needed some training in this, and he's actually signed up for one of the equine abuse classes that just helps law enforcement or anyone working with horses to recognize some of these problems.

But as a veterinarian, if you get the phone call ... I often get a phone call after that from some of our AAEP members that will say, "look, I've never done this before, and I don't want to mess this up. How do I handle this? Or should I get involved?" Some of the questions that are consistently thrown out to me are, "is this gonna affect my practice? You know, if I stick my neck on the chopping block will my clients stop coming to the practice. Or, you know, is my boss going to take this out on me?" You know, whatever.

And again, I always say, you know, we're the advocate for the horse, and if we don't help them, no one else will.

I can tell you in 29 years of practice, if we have lost any business from dealing with equine welfare, I haven't noticed because our practice has literally improved every year.

So, I can't imagine somebody shunning us as a veterinarian because they're afraid we might turn them in for equine abuse. So, I don't think that's as much of a problem as we fear that it can be.

The other thing that you can do is the AAEP has a toolkit that you can access either as a veterinarian, or if you're into law enforcement or you're a shelter worker. They also have a second tool kit that will help you through this. We also have many resources on how to approach, you know, going onto the farm. Are you permitted on the farm? Do you take law enforcement with you? There are a lot of publications through the AAP answering these questions, and then of course, any of us that are involved with the equine welfare team—and there's quite a few of us through the AAEP—we're all happy to answer any questions that you might have because this may be a novel approach to tending to these horses. You know, sometimes, the laws are different state to state, and we can kind of guide you with that. So, if you've practiced in one state and you can access a farm without law enforcement, but maybe in the state that you're practicing and now you can't. You should be aware of that because oftentimes these cases are lost on small glitches, you know, just a technicality. Either the person wasn't given the right paperwork or you weren't permitted on the property.

You know, without guidance through law enforcement, there are many avenues to these glitches, and we really try to troubleshoot them. And, Michigan, has a law school that really specializes in animal law. And we try to guide the veterinarians to them because every day the law school, I believe it's just called Michiganlaw.com—You can Google it—they, survey some of the rules and regs that are on their website pertaining to abuse in a state. Like for

instance, it would it be, would you charge them as a felony or is this a misdemeanor? So, you have that information on there and you can access it. And as like I said, it's very current. Literally they look at it every day. So that's another way to get involved.

**Kim Brown:** [00:15:22] That's a great resource. Thanks for letting us know about that.

So let's go to a little more personal question. Why should an equine veterinarian get involved?

**Dr. Clara Mason:** Well, I would hope that ... one of the issues that I think we see in ...equine vets are just such a lovely group of folks. I mean, they're really cowboy and cowgirl tough. I mean, we all have been stepped on, pushed, kicked, thrown, you know, whatever out there in the field. But at the same time, I think that we all really have a love for the horse that goes beyond, what's the word I'm looking for ... So I think that the passion that the equine veterinarian has for the horse goes beyond their professional choices and limitations.

Veterinarian should get involved because again, we may be the only person that is the advocate for the horse in certain scenarios. I will tell you the one question that we get over and over and over again is, "do I know enough to go to court?" And the answer is yes, absolutely.

As equine veterinarian, we are the one person in the courtroom that knows more than any other person. We are the expert. And when you go to court—if you have to go to court—have the attorney certify you as an expert witness. And the difference is that if you go in as just a veterinarian who's working on an equine abuse case, you can answer questions such as, do you think this horse is skinny? Yes or no. Do you think this horse, his body condition score's a two? Yes or no.

But when you are certified as an expert witness—which I can't really think of a reason why we shouldn't be, you should not be excluded—you can, the judge can ask you a question like, Hey, Dr. Mason, how long did it take this horse to get this skinny? Or do you think this horse can survive a winter in this condition?

So that's where your expertise comes in. You are the expert witness and no one knows more about the horse than you do. And this should give you the confidence to go into that courtroom and know that what you are talking about is a legitimate science and that your opinion matters.

**Kim Brown:** Well that's a great point. So, I know veterinarians, some equine vets they're concerned, as you mentioned, about getting involved in some of this, whether it's because they're worried about clients. They're worried about it taking time away from practice. They're worried about, you know, what ramifications they'll have and if they show up in court. But can you talk about some of the challenges and how you've addressed them successfully?

**Dr. Clara Mason:** I think that one of the bigger issues that has affected our practice, but I often times will get a phone call on this as well, is the money portion of this—who is

responsible for your salary? Who is responsible for you going to court? Who is responsible for the care and custody of the horses?

So I always tell everyone do not assume custody of the horses, meaning that just because you have two empty stalls, it's not your job because you're the veterinarian on this case.

It's not your job to take those horses of and care for them, unless this is something that you want to do. But again, I would highly recommend that you don't get that close to the case because then there's always that question. And Lord, I've had this come up a million times where the person who has lost their horses—and you may be in court with them—the first thing they say is you want my horses.

And I always respond with no, I don't. I've got three of my own and they're plenty for us, you know? So I don't want your horse. I don't want anybody's horses.

And I really recommend it, if you can, you separate yourself away from this, you know. Whether you have stalls in the backyard or in your clinic, you know, now that's a different story if you're treating the whole.

But again, if the horse should go up for adoption, I also recommend that you do not adopt the horse. If your friend wants to adopt the horse, and then you want to buy the horse from your friend, that's a better picture or a better scenario than if you straight out go and adopt the horse, because then it doesn't really bode well for the team if somebody actually gained something from this crisis, if you will.

So, the money should be sorted out in the beginning and counties or shelters, or if they're going over to the local rescue group, they're the ones who should be responsible for the money. You should be paid whatever you feel you feel is fair. You have to remember that you're writing reports as well. So you're going to have some time doing extra work outside of the field. You also have to remember that you have to go to court. Now. You don't have to bill anybody for your court time until it happens, but then again, you want to make sure that you establish either through the prosecutor or whomever's assumed the horses that you're going to be paid because you know, this is a job. I mean, this is what we do for a living.

So I really recommend that you get all of that established before you jump in on the off chance that possibly there's no money available. There is federal money out there. And when I say federal I don't mean really through the government. But there's money at, or I should say national money, not federal, there's money out there through different rescue groups. You have to find them, and you know, this that's a late night with a pot of coffee and your computer. But there have been a few vets that have gotten or received payment through some of these other groups.

**Kim Brown:** Wow, it sounds like not only very physically and time demanding, but an emotionally demanding thing to become involved in some of these cases where these horses, even if it's just through ignorance, have been neglected to the point where they either die or close to death.

**Dr. Clara Mason:** You know, that brings up a good point, too.

Again, because we obviously enjoy working with horses, you know, this is how we selected our career choice. Sometimes it's more humane for the horse to be euthanized than to attempt to restore health. Sometimes the damage has been done. And oftentimes you have to remember that if a horse has been ... we see this occasionally ... you've had a tendon rupture or possibly a fracture—we're having a lot of fractured legs recently because there's a band of horses running between West Virginia and Kentucky through the coal mines, abandoned coal mines. And they wandered down into the towns. And unfortunately, a lot of them get struck by vehicles. So we're having to deal with some fractures that have healed improperly.

So, these horses are gonna need medication. Or possibly special leg bandages, you know, whatever the case may be, for the life of the animal. And you have to remember that sometimes ownership changes. So those ... somebody with the means to take care of the horse may adopt the horse. Then possibly in a year or two, something in their life may change and they have to rehome the horse.

And you're going to have to find somebody that can afford to take care of a horse that is possibly not rideable or usable. So, there's, there's a lot to it. And it's hard sometimes to have the frank dialogue with a veterinarian that you know what, we're better off euthanizing this horse because it's just too painful to try to restore health. And don't ever feel guilty for having to make that choice. Often that's the braver choice.

**Kim Brown:** And that's a good point. You know, that veterinarians have, as you have said several times, they have to be the advocate for the animal because sometimes people will be willing to even put money towards something in the recovery of a horse, but it may not be in the horses' best interest.

**Dr. Clara Mason:** Correct.

**Kim Brown:** So is there, excuse me, anything else that you would like to advise to veterinarians who, you know, might get involved with an equine rescue or neglect or abuse situation?

**Dr. Clara Mason:** Kim, do you have any ideas on that? I'm racking my brain.

**Kim Brown:** I think you've done a great job covering it all.

**Dr. Clara Mason:** I appreciate that.

I mean, everything I spoke about today, for me has recently been redundant, but that's just because so many of these horses are ending up back in the shelters. And then the second thing, because of COVID last year, it looked like, you know, we had zero abuse cases. But the problem was is that the shelter workers couldn't go out to investigate.

So now everybody's back to work and they're vaccinated and the abuse cases are on the rise, or it seems to be, but it's not that they are on the rise, it's just that we're back to work. And the second problem is a lot of people adopted horses during COVID when they were working from home and now the situation's changed either financially or they've had to go

back to work or whatever the case may be. And we're noticing that more and more horses are being returned back to the rescues.

**Kim Brown:** So that's a good point.

**Dr. Clara Mason:** We have that other problem now, but that's been recently where our phone calls have come in or emails, you know, Hey, I need help. And this is why.

**Kim Brown:** Yeah. Well, I think this has been some great information, Dr. Mason, and again, and we remind the veterinarian's listening to this and other interested folks that the American Association of Equine Practitioners, AAEP.org, has a lot of great resources that can help veterinarians or law enforcement or other folks. And as Dr. Mason said, those on the Welfare Committee of AAEP are happy to talk to veterinarians who need maybe some advice on getting involved in some of these cases.

So, thank you for all this great information today, Dr. Mason, and we want to thank our audience for listening to Disease Du Jour. And a special thanks to our 2021 sponsor Merck Animal Health.

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