

Veterinary, equine community dispel accusations against the pregnant mare urine industry

The two sides of the pregnant mare urine debate, at face value, appear to be horse lovers versus a pharmaceutical company. An estrogen replacement therapy drug, taken by more than 10 million women in the United States every day, is made in part from the urine of pregnant mares. The fact in question for some time—are the mares on these pregnant mare urine farms and ranches being treated humanely? And what about the fate of their foals?

Currently, there are around 37,000 broodmares on 422 PMU farms and ranches in Canada and North Dakota. They cross all breeds but are most commonly registered Quarter Horses. The urine is collected over a five- to six-month period (October through March), coinciding with the winter season. Barns housing the pregnant mares are temperature controlled.

The mares are put to pasture in March, and in April or May they deliver some 30,000 foals that are weaned through September. During the summer, with the addition of a stallion to each band of mares, the horses breed naturally, and the cycle begins again.

Wyeth-Ayerst Global Pharmaceuticals, which has produced Premarin, a drug derived from PMU, for nearly six decades, insists that animal welfare organizations are reporting erroneous information when it comes to the care of the horses on PMU ranches. Stories of horses being kept in stalls too small for them to take more than a few steps in either direction, of rubber urine-collection bags causing chafed limbs and irritated vulvas, and of forced dehydration so urine is more concentrated, are all false, the pharmaceutical firm and most veterinary inspectors say.

A statement from the company details that, starting in 1996, Wyeth-Ayerst invited teams of equine veterinarians, and others representing the world's leading equine veterinary bodies, to

visit representative PMU ranches" in Canada and North Dakota.

Dr. Nat T. Messer, member of the AAEP Equine Welfare Committee, and past member of the board of directors, was one of the veterinarians welcomed in 1996 to inspect PMU farms, along with representatives from the Canadian VMA and the United Kingdom's International League for the Protection of Horses. Dr. Messer was sur-



Despite allegations from animal activist groups, the pregnant mares are able to lie down comfortably in the barn, according to veterinary inspectors.



Inside a PMU barn during the collection season; the mares have access to food and are given water every two hours.

prised at what he found, or more specifically, what he didn't find.

"I think the first thing you have to be

able to do is look beyond the way the mares are housed," he said. "Your first thought is that horses ought to be running around out on a field to be happy. But we saw, for the most part, a lot of well-cared-for, healthy horses on this inspection tour."

The equine experts drafted a 1996-1997 consensus report on the conditions of the PMU farms, addressing the issues of exercise, water intake, nutrition, housing, and veterinary care of the broodmares, concluding: "The ranchers took pride in their animals, and Wyeth-Ayerst showed a commitment to continuing to improve the standards of equine welfare on the farms. Based on our inspections, the allegations of inhumane treatment of horses involved in PMU ranching are unfounded. Generally, the horses are

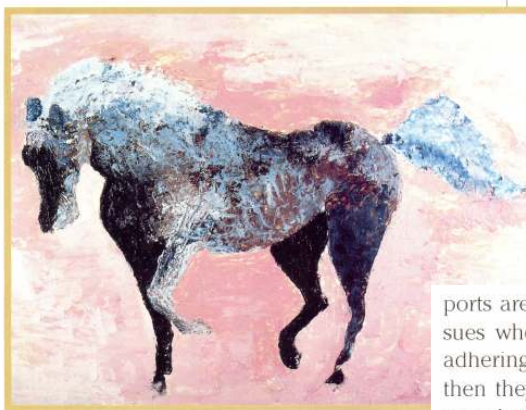
very well cared for, the ranchers and the company have responded in a progressive and proactive manner to both professional and public interest. Observations for improvement have been taken seriously and continue to be acted upon by Wyeth-Ayerst and the PMU ranchers. The public should be assured that the care and welfare of the horses involved in the production of an estrogen replacement medication is good, and is closely monitored."

One organization responsible for monitoring the PMU industry and educating ranchers and critics is the North American Equine Ranching Information Council. The Louisville, Ky., organization is the umbrella association for the

PMU farm industry, comprising second-, third-, and fourth-generation ranchers. Its Regulated Code of Practice, a 19-page document outlining the proper care in all forms for mares in the PMU industry, was drafted in 1989—four years before animal activists started allegations of inhumane treatment on the farms. Norm Luba is the executive director.

"The [Regulated Code of Practice] has to be contractually adhered to by any rancher that is producing PMU to sell to [Wyeth-Ayerst]," Luba said. The code is enforced through a series of regular inspections conducted by the company itself and independent veterinarians.

"[The company goes] out each and every month throughout the entire year, not just the collection season, and they review the ranches and issue a report," Luba said. "Then the [independent] veterinarians come in and do their reports [three times] during the collection season. All of those reports are submitted to the company's representative veterinarian, and those re-



ports are compared. ... If there are issues where the ranchers are just not adhering to the code or the contract, then they have full authority to eliminate the rancher from the system."

The foals born to the mares are of concern to animal activist groups as well. They see the foals as surplus for disposal, a commercial byproduct of the industry. And yes, foals are sold at auction by the hundreds to feedlot operators, who then send them to slaughter for European and Asian meat markets. The NAERIC insists that it is actively involved in trying to place those foals elsewhere through buyers' assistance plans. For three years, the Ryerss Farm for Aged

Equines, a southeast Pennsylvania farm, has been purchasing foals from equine ranchers and assisting in placing the young horses with new owners. They buy up to 50 each year.

In 2000, a Canadian counterpart, PMU Foal Quest, purchased 300 foals at risk for slaughter and is looking for new homes for them.

"My view of the human consump-

tion of horsemeat is [it's] a cultural issue; it's an emotional issue," Luba said. "[One] objective with our association is to improve the genetics of our herd, to sell quality horses to as many markets as we can. If anyone thinks there aren't going to be some culls through that process, I guess they don't really know animal agriculture."



A rubber bag is fitted over the horse for the collection of urine, to be used in the production of the hormone replacement drug.

Luba sites examples of his own family owning championship horses born to PMU mares, and a 1998 Quarter Horse gelding that finished his qualification for the American Quarter Horse Association's 2002 World Championship show by winning the Junior Western Trail Class in Scottsdale, Ariz.

After the 1996-1997 inspections, the AAEP issued a position statement characterizing the PMU industry as "representing responsible management of horses to produce a commodity for the benefit of mankind that should not result in abuse, neglect, or inhumane treatment of horses." The position was based on on-site investigations, peer review of

ongoing research, the industry's code of practice, and the outcome of the 1996-1997 Equine Veterinarians' Consensus Report on the industry.

In June 2001, the AVMA Executive Board endorsed the AAEP position statement, saying it represents current knowledge and is in keeping with good veterinary practice.

In Canada, Dr. Allan Preston, director of the Veterinary Services Branch for Manitoba Agriculture and Food, the province housing the largest number of PMU farms, said, "From my perspective as a person who has worked with the industry in various capacities now for almost 30 years, this is a very acceptable role for the horse to play in society. Without a doubt, those horses are very well cared for."

Dr. Messer agrees. "These horses are kept in a real friendly environment in the wintertime. They're protected from the elements, they're well fed, they're given adequate amounts of water, and their health needs are met relative to taking care of parasites and vaccinations. They can lie down. The equipment is not in them; it's around them.

"I think the issue that may be most important is that there is no other aspect of the horse industry that I'm aware of, that is so closely scrutinized." 