

Figure 2. Education range of owners with horse welfare problems.

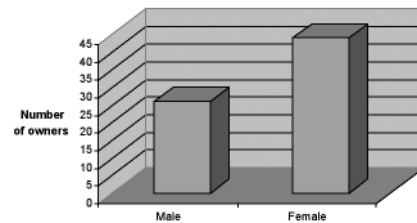


Figure 3. Gender of owners with horse welfare problems.

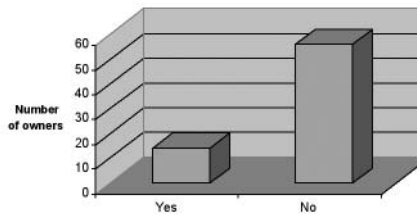


Figure 4. Owner identification at the paddock of horses with welfare problems.

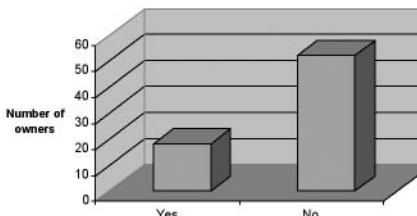


Figure 5. Horse club membership of owners with horse welfare problems.

Lack of commitment to horse ownership was found to be the main factor associated with the occurrence of horse welfare problems. Commitment was defined by asking owners how frequently they rode their horse, whether or not they had ever had riding lessons, whether they were members of any horse clubs or organisations, and how frequently they read horse books or magazines. A substantial amount of effort is required on a daily basis to maintain a horse adequately, including feeding, foot care, grooming, rugging, general supervision, exercise and maintenance of the paddock, in all kinds of weather. Therefore a lack of commitment to horse ownership will likely have resulted in lack of motivation to care for the horse, which may then have led to horse welfare problems.

Additionally, more severe horse welfare problems were associated with owners who had a lower level of education, lived in the fringe and suburban areas of the city (within 50km of CBD) and believed that horses made good companions. These findings provide an insight into the literacy of owners of horses that are at risk of severe welfare problems, and indicate the regions in which such owners are likely to be concentrated, and therefore should be considered when developing education strategies.

It does seem contradictory that owners who believed that horses made good companions were associated with more severe horse welfare problems. A possible explanation for this finding is that owners of extremely neglected or poorly managed horses were fond of their horses, however they may have treated them similarly to other companion animals that require less time and effort, such as a cats or dogs, and had unrealistic expectations of the horses' requirements. Additionally, these owners may not have understood what constitutes a welfare problem and therefore did not prevent the problem becoming severe. This is particularly where education of new and prospective horse owners can be invaluable to make such owners aware of the high level of care and commitment required in horse ownership, before a problem arises.

Why is council's role so important?

The role of councils is crucial in contacting horse owners that are not otherwise easily located, to provide education material about horse ownership.

For example, the study found that the vast majority of owners with horse welfare problems were not members of any horse clubs or organisations. Being a member of a club not only provides information about horse ownership and facilitates education through peers, but also usually requires the contact details of the owner to be registered with the club. Registering contact details with a club enables easy dissemination of education material to club members. Most owners of horses at risk of welfare problems are therefore not likely to be exposed to education information through clubs and can be extremely difficult to contact. Furthermore, these owners are not likely to seek such information due to a lack of interest and commitment to horse ownership. Council's access to postal addresses through rates records is an ideal way to reach the "unreachable".

Additionally, attempting to contact owners through their horse paddocks is not likely to be successful. Many owners with horse welfare problems that were studied did not provide their identification or contact details at the horse paddock, which contributed to the difficulty in locating these owners. Being able to contact horse owners easily is particularly important in emergency situations such as a horse wandering at large on a busy road or suffering from severe injury, because if the owner can not be readily contacted the horse is often destroyed. Furthermore, liability for any damage to vehicles by a wandering horse can not be given to the owner if the owner can not be found.

What can councils do?

There are a number of ways that councils can help to reduce the number of horse welfare problems, keeping in mind the demographic information outlined above. Using the contact details of the rates records, as suggested above, councils could:

- Send brief coloured fact sheets with pictures and limited written information, particularly to people in fringe areas of the city. Some ideas might be "when to call a vet", "what is laminitis/founder?" or "how can I tell if my horse is too fat or too thin?"
 - Send postcards with a simple message (eg "identify your horse", or "is your paddock fencing safe?").
 - Send brochures with council local law information relating to horses.
 - Run a microchipping day and send flyers in the mail advertising the event.
- Other things councils could do to reduce horse welfare problems include:
- Introduce compulsory identification and registration of horses in your municipality, as the City of Hobson's Bay has done in Victoria. This will assist with funds for education strategies and will enable you to identify horse owners in your municipality. A reduced registration rate could apply to owners that are members with certain horse clubs, so the owners would be encouraged to join a club and thus receive education material from the club.
 - Encourage voluntary identification of horses and registration with council by offering to distribute education material to horse owners registered with council. Horse health information will be available from your State Agriculture Department.
 - Place billboards or A-frame signs around the municipality with horse education information or legislation requirements, particularly in fringe areas of the city.
 - Run a council pet education day with a fête and include horse care education material. Perhaps incorporate a microchipping day with this.
 - Approach primary and secondary schools about running a horse care education day at the school.
 - Develop and maintain riding trails to encourage owners to ride and enjoy their horse, to discourage them from neglecting their horses.
 - Approach State horse councils for industry contribution to education strategies and materials (State horse racing bodies may also be helpful in this regard).

Conclusion

Municipal councils play a vital role in the prevention of horse welfare problems through their access to the contact details of residents in their municipality that include horse owners and prospective horse owners. This enables the distribution of horse care education material to reach the target owners, which is otherwise extremely difficult. Municipal councils also have the advantage that they have the authority to introduce measures that will contribute to improved horse welfare in the municipality such as compulsory horse identification and registration, and other strategies such as local laws on fencing requirements, stocking rates, shelter requirements, effluent management and paddock aesthetics.

Reference: Pearson, N. Y. (2003) "A study of horse ownership and management in Victoria, Australia".

Unpublished thesis, Master of Animal Welfare, Institute of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne.

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Naomi Pearson has been with the Bureau of Animal Welfare for 5 years, is currently the Equine Policy and Legislation Officer at BAW, and handles all horse related issues at BAW. This involves drafting and revising legislation and Codes of Practice related to protecting the welfare of horses, developing and distributing education materials for horse owners, and managing government policies relating to horse welfare. Some examples of Code of Practice are the welfare of animals in rodeos, horse hire establishments, and now the revision of the general Code of Practice for the Welfare of Horses. Naomi liaises with the horse industry through membership with the Victorian Horse Council, with municipal councils on horse related issues, and with animal welfare organisations.