

## The Final Farewell

Bill was a heavy hunter and 29 years old. His time had come one wet summer morning whilst at pasture with his 3 companions. At 07.30 he was trotting around but by 09.00 he was down and couldn't get up. His owner and friend called me to euthanase him. Bill lay on his side placed his head in his friend's lap and slowly left this mortal world before I arrived.

Over 25 years in veterinary practice I have never experienced a more perfect death. It is how we hope our beloved companions will end their lives – peacefully and with dignity with us at hand.

Those of us blessed with horses in our lives realise that they give us so much of their own free will. They are keen to please and enjoy human company. They are definitely 'Givers' and not 'Takers' and deserve our respect and care. Bill's death was to my mind as near to perfect as possible but death is rarely so easy to deal with. Few horses die calmly in their sleep which means owners have to make a difficult and emotional decision to euthanase their friend. It is the duty of all of us to make this process as stress free, dignified and humane as possible.

Traditionally horses were euthanased with a gun either by the Vet, Hunt or Knacker man. Guns were a part of rural life and post war many people were used to firearms. This is no longer the case and most vets have little experience with firearms before they start work. Firearms are noisy, violent and inherently dangerous. Bullets can misfire- I remember two occasions when the gun fired with a loud bang and the horse stood rock solid almost eyeing me up saying 'so what'. The next round was successful and only my embarrassment survived. I now warn owners of this potential problem. Forewarned is forearmed! With a gun it is necessary to line up so the bullet travels in the midline aimed down the spine and as such the head is better raised to the normal position. Feeding from a bucket at this time is not advised and head shy horses are better sedated or euthanased by injection. There is commonly a variable amount of blood from the wound and sometimes the nostril but the horse should collapse immediately. However the heart will take many minutes to finally stop and some gasping breaths, limb movements and muscle twitches are not uncommon.

Euthanasia by injection has become much more common over the last 2 decades and is essentially an overdose of anaesthesia. Most horses sink slowly to the ground either sideways or backwards but can fall in any direction. No technique is 100% - an experienced colleague injected the required dose but the horse didn't show any effect! He repeated the dose and then everything went as planned.

Once the horse is euthanised there is still the question of the body. Horses that are shot can either be collected by the hunt, knacker or sent for cremation. Those that are euthanased by injection can only be cremated. This is because the EU and hence Defra see a horse as a farm animal and hence they cannot be buried.( Animal By- Products regulations 2003)

However there is a possible alternative for '**Pet**' horses if the local authority are willing. You may have to be persistent and patient in getting to a person who understands the position and has the authority to give permission for you to bury your horse on your land. It is always better to do this well before the expected time of death.

An alternative is to use the National Fallen Stock Scheme set up by Defra. Horse owners have been able to register since Nov 2004. 0845 054 8888. Lines are open 7:00am to 7:00pm, Monday to Friday, 9:00am to 1:00pm Saturday. Alternatively they can complete an application form obtainable from the national fallen stock website [www.nationalfallenstock.co.uk](http://www.nationalfallenstock.co.uk) or by calling the same number.

The Defra web address is [www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/) and look under fallen stock