

AATA/NPTC Groom Scheme Update

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As many if not all of you know we started working on the grooms program early in the 90's and after many years of hard work and considerable frustration we established a registry of grooms world wide.

Quoting from the history section of the Animal Attendant Program on our web site "It was an effort of our Equine Committee representing industry Leaders being proactive in their efforts to self regulate and elevate the standards within our industry and therefore the welfare of the horses being shipped world-wide. It came as a direct result of years of unqualified and unsuitable grooms being put on flights and responsible for horses without the knowledge or experience to do so". We were also prompted to address this issue as EU directives were issued requiring the employment of 'competent' animal handlers during transport.

Initially we simply tried to define "competence" and then to identify flying grooms who met our definition of competence. We then recognised that we needed to move further and, in conjunction with the National Proficiency Test Council (NPTC) in Great Britain, we developed a program of independent assessment for animal attendants, which has become recognized on an international level for its uniqueness and foresight.

It should, however, be noted that we strived with the NPTC to create the highest possible standards which resulted in a number of applicants not passing the test although they will all have an opportunity to re-apply when they have received further training from assessed attendants.

Considering the current political climate and after 9/11 we decided to include a 10-year criminal background check from a government authority to give airlines, their crews and airport authorities an additional level of confidence in the integrity of our program. It was interesting and regrettable to note that not all applicants could fulfil this requirement.

Joe Santarelli and I have now spent in excess of 10 years at our own personal expense working on the groom's issues and trying to improve standards in the airfreight industry for horses.

IATA has endorsed what we have produced but only to a certain extent. This is good, in itself, but not entirely satisfactory as all carriers are not IATA members and adherence to IATA requirements is strictly voluntary and airlines are not subject to sanctions for non-compliance.

At the end of the day many agents and carriers choose to ignore accepted international standards, not to mention even those most basic. The safety and welfare of those horses being transported is not paramount to these agents and carriers. What is paramount to them is getting the maximum amount of horses into the minimum amount of space thereby generating the maximum possible revenue at the minimum possible cost.

What potentially suffers as a result – equine safety and welfare!

Presently we have over 50 assessed equine attendants worldwide based in AUS, CAN, DEN, GBR, IRL, NZL, ESP and the USA.

We are now currently in the process of establishing an Ethics Committee to deal with professional misconduct of those attendants on our professional register. In this regard I

would welcome any comments, suggestions, from you all on what constitutes professional misconduct as the list of unacceptable behaviour is probably endless.

It is clearly not possible for every attendant on a given flight to be registered with the AATA/NPTC as all, quite simply, cannot be expected to meet the minimum standard required. However, the ultimate aim must surely be to have at least one registered equine attendant on board every flight carrying equines who can oversee those with less experience and not yet qualified.

There is no doubt that there are many competent attendants out there that we have not certified, either, because they have not heard of our program or, if they have, have not yet had an opportunity to be examined.

There is also no doubt, a much larger group out there flying with horses with little or no experience, but unscrupulous agents and ignorant carriers are putting them on flights – why? Because they cost less than professional flying groomers and it then becomes simply a question of saving money and increasing profits.

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For those carriers that think that they can indemnify themselves by asking an agent to certify the competence of the attendant that is being sent on a flight there is an additional problem. Unscrupulous agents may well certify incompetent attendants and I must question if many airline employees have the knowledge or the qualifications to identify if the agent is acting in a responsible manner by issuing such a certificate and if the groom really is competent to fly with the shipment.

We (AATA/NPTC) have provided the airlines with a minimum standard of competence certified by an EU government approved body. If airlines choose to ignore this standard, and choose not to insist on having registered attendants (or at least one certified attendant per shipment) on their aircraft, then they can only blame themselves when things go seriously wrong and they find themselves the focus of media attention.

It really is now time for all those in the horse transportation chain to use “best practise” standards, be it agent, carrier or be it the utilisation of acceptable groom/horse ratios, with horses accompanied by competent, registered groomers. We have established what these standards are so let us, as an industry, regulate ourselves, before Bruxelles, Washington and the rest of the world start regulating us.

What is at risk if these standards are not met? The safety and welfare of the equine passengers entrusted to our care. Need I say more?