

Equine Chiropractic Care

One by one over the past decade various alternative therapies for the racehorse have been brought into the mainstream of veterinary medicine.

Most have been deemed adjunctive to traditional therapy, and as confidence in a particular modality improved in the profession some have become the technique of first choice for some conditions - acupuncture, for example.

The modality which has sustained the most scepticism among equine practitioners has been chiropractic care for the horse. It has been difficult for the veterinarian to imagine how the huge frame of the horse can be manipulated in such a fashion as to "adjust" an abnormality.

A number of charlatans claiming great results with horses increased doubts among equine practitioners. Within the past few years, however, a few specialists have perfected chiropractic care of horses in such a manner that the veterinary profession is taking a fresh look.

There are many documented cases where chiropractic manipulation of a horse was a welcomed therapeutic measure that brought relief where everything else had failed.

You may have heard of miraculous Chiropractic care for horses at the racetrack. You have probably wondered if there is really anything to it. After all, you can't make an intelligent decision about a new technique based on one or two horses that improved after being treated.

The problem with that kind of deduction is that you seldom hear of the failures. If you decide to give chiropractic an opportunity on your horse, make sure you locate someone with the proper credentials for doing chiropractic on horses.

Speaking at the December AAEP meeting, in San Antonio, TX, Dr. Sharon L. Willoughby, DVM, DC, described equine chiropractic care as a rapidly growing health-care adjunct for the equine patient. Her emphasis was on when to refer and how to incorporate chiropractic care into practice.

Willoughby emphasized that chiropractic is invaluable in detecting and treating gait abnormalities and other performance problems in the athletic horse. She said that chiropractic adjustments in the horse do alleviate pain from the back and neck. She reported that some nerve damage, such as pressure on the sciatic nerve, respond well to adjustments.

Another use of chiropractic in horses is during the prepurchase examination. There are chiropractic techniques which can help to identify horses that have chronic back and neck problems, as well as assess the potential that a horse may have for success in a particular endeavour.

Willoughby said that chiropractors deal almost exclusively with the pathologies and dysfunction created by vertebral subluxations, but that the traditional veterinary definition of a subluxation as an incomplete or partial dislocation is not an accurate definition of the vertebral subluxation as described in chiropractic.

Nevertheless, she said that "subluxations" may alter neurological function of the spinal cord, the spinal nerve roots, and portions of the autonomic nervous system. Altered nerve transmission is caused by pressure or traction on a nerve, changes in cerebrospinal fluid flow, vascular flow to neural tissues, or alterations in axoplasmic flow.

Adjusting skill depends on knowledge of vertebral anatomy, according to Willoughby. She affirmed that the practitioner must know vertebral joint relationships, the location and orientation of osseous processes, the relationship of neural components, muscle attachments and nerve supply, vertebral joint anatomy, and normal and abnormal range of motion.

The equine vertebral column is a flexible structure that permits the horse to perform in a wide variety of athletic endeavors, such as lowering the head, arching the back, and lateral bending. Spinal movements consist of flexion-extension, axial rotation, and lateral flexion.

"The equine vertebral column has over 170 joints. This number breaks down into 30 intervertebral disks, 64 zygapophyseal joints, 36 costotransverse joints, 36 costovertebral joints, 2 sacroiliac joints, 1 joint of the dens, and 6-8 intertransverse joints," Willoughby enumerated. "The vertebral column is also subject to movements and forces from compression, tension, vertical shear, and horizontal shear".

The chiropractic examination begins with a case history, and then continues with several phases: posture analysis, gait analysis, static palpation, motion palpation, and orthopedic or neurological examination.

Willoughby described the signs to look for in a history as "lameness, stiffness, lack of impulsion or power, difficult collection, poor attitude, gait abnormalities, being cold backed, or muscle atrophy.

Some of the signs that indicate a problem during the posture analysis are: lordosis, kyphosis, scoliosis, abnormal foot placement, and abnormal head and neck position.

Gait analysis in chiropractic is mostly a visual observation of the horse moving, observing for lameness and such indicators as "hiking one hip, short stride, rope walking, unstable hocks, stumbling, toe grab, ataxia, weakness, and shortened stride".