



# EQUINE OSTEOPATHY

(Part 1)

By Sue Akehurst, England

Just as people suffer from stiffness, arthritic conditions degeneration, soreness and general wear and tear, so do animals. Osteopathy is a well-established treatment method of manual therapy that works on treating the body as a whole, not just the symptom. Osteopathy is as popular for horses as it is for people. The North American Indians used to use manual manipulative medicine to treat their animals, as well as each other.

Osteopaths in the United Kingdom are regulated by The General Osteopathic Council and all receive 5 years training. Treatments include soft tissue work, ultrasound and electro-therapy, acupuncture, manipulation and craniosacral work. Equine Osteopathy is used to treat such conditions as cold back, head tossing, sacroiliac lesion, tendon injury, ligament overstrain, and lameness due to back disorder.

Problems in the back can disturb the mechanical function of the whole body. Back pain can affect a horse in many ways ranging from lameness in one or both hind-limbs, loss of impulsion, reluctance to jump, reduced bend in the back in one or both directions, elevated head carriage and back stiffness during exercise. Other problems such as pelvic, stifle or hock pain, and changes in temperament and behaviour are also

common symptoms.

**Anthony Pusey** pioneered the application of human osteopathic techniques in the treatment of animals and worked enthusiastically to place animal osteopathy on a firm scientific footing. His many patients included the horses of the Queens Household Cavalry at Knightsbridge barracks, as well as the horses at Buckingham Palace Mews and Windsor Castle.

**Jonathan Cohen** studied under Anthony Pusey and was the first osteopath in Europe to hold a university-validated qualification in veterinary osteopathy - an intensive course that included veterinary anatomy, pathology, and physiology. He is a founder member of the Society of Osteopaths in Animal Practice (SOAP). The Society was set up in 2004 following close consultation with the General Osteopathic Council. (GOsC). The aims of the society are to promote the professional development of osteopathy within the area of animal treatment.

## Can you explain what Osteopathy is?

Osteopathy is an established, recognised system of diagnosis and treatment that lays its main emphasis on the structural integrity of the body. Osteopathy is also a system of manual therapy with a strong emphasis on anatomy and physiology. In

other words if a wheel is fitted to a car and all the bolts are not done up tightly, then the suspension is not going to work properly on that side of the car, and the wheels are not going to spin smoothly, and then the wear and tear on the car is going to be uneven and the people inside the car are going to have an uncomfortable ride. Similarly if there is a problem with your ankle it is going to affect your knee and your hip and lower back, your neck, and shoulder, everything. So it is about structure, function and correcting unevenness.

## How do you become an osteopath? How do you train and what is involved in the training?

Since 1993 osteopathy in the United Kingdom has become a government legislated qualification and a protected title. That means that the government wants to standardise training so that it is regulated. The osteopathic qualification is a Bachelor of Science degree course that takes 5 years to complete. It incorporates a strong foundation in anatomy, medical pathology and osteopathic technique and therefore a clear rationale of how and why an osteopathic technique affects the body the way it does.

## What is Thermography and how does

## it help with Osteopathy?

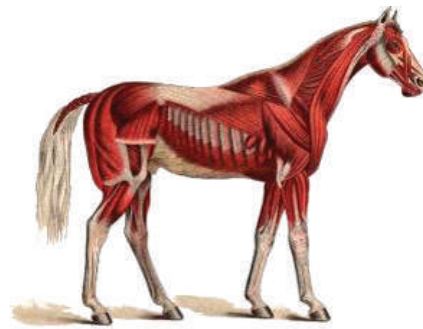
Thermography is a non-invasive way of measuring soft tissue temperature changes, commonly used in screening for breast cancer in humans. Chronic or acute injuries all show up as different gradients of colour in thermographic images. The colour gradient one looks at is a good indication of the state of the soft tissues which are being scanned. Shades of red can represent inflammation and blue often indicates lack of circulation. A heat detection camera is used in a temperature controlled room and the scans are fed into a computer to view the images.



## If I or my horse needed an Osteopath what signs would I look out for or what would I see or feel?

That's a very good question, and it is also a very broad one. However, to try and sum it up I would say that with horses, riders can notice things like unevenness, and often comment on an inability for the horse to work in any one direction. For example, work on the left rein might be unequal to work on the right rein. Horses can also change in habits when they have functional or musculoskeletal problems, so a horse that has always been a good show jumper may suddenly become agitated when it faces a jump, or start to stop at a place that it never did before. Dressage horses are lovely to work with because the riders, especially at international level, are super knowledgeable about tiny subtle movements, so if the horse is not performing as it normally would then that can be an indication to have it checked.

On a more basic level, a horse may have suddenly become sensitive in their back and may buck or rear when the saddle is put on, or even with just a subtle bit of pressure. Someone may notice as they groom their horse that the animal may flinch when pressure is applied to the back or neck. All of these signs can be good indicators that there may be a functional or musculoskeletal problem. We humans suffer from general spinal stiffness, neck stiffness, and headaches to problems with external joints like knees, elbows, and shoulders. The range of symptoms we suffer from can be huge and the relationship between the rider



and the horse is very important. In terms of how the horse and rider come together; if you find it difficult to look over your left or right shoulder, or similarly if you are much more dominant on one side than the other, it is very logical that eventually this is going to affect how the horse is working. Some people still say, that horses are big and strong and don't need any hands-on treatment. But just look how a horse reacts when a fly lands on its back and how it can turn inside-out because of this tiny little bit of pressure on it somewhere.

## So osteopathy isn't just focussing on the back, shoulder and neck it is all the joints?

It is, however, I would say that 95% of what osteopaths see is spinal, from the poll all the way down to the coccygeal (the 35 segments of the vertebrae most distant from the skull) or tail. Also in a lot of cases any kind of swelling or oedema around the joints, around the stifle, hock, or knee etc is quite often something that we would suggest getting a vet to look at as well. It is important to remember that as much as possible, we work in conjunction with vets, because a team approach is advantageous in equine care.

## So why and when should I call an osteopath as opposed to a vet?

In the United Kingdom the law states that osteopaths, physiotherapists and

chiropractors must have veterinary consent before treating an animal. 90% of the time the osteopath wouldn't see the vet, but the vet will be made aware either by the osteopath, or the owner, that the horse is going to be seen and treated. A multi-disciplinary team is often more affective when working together and it also ensures that treatments complement each other rather than clash. Vets, farriers, and even dentists will often refer horses to osteopaths following remedial work in their field.

## What could I expect during a typical consult?

The osteopath looks for signs of muscle swelling, muscle loss & symmetry and any signs of abnormality. Following a detailed case history, this includes questions about current medication or treatment, the breed, age and sex of the horse as well as a horse's previous musculoskeletal and systematic problems, dental and foot care. The osteopath examines the horse before treating it. When horses show muscle spasm and rigidity upon examination this is a positive sign of back pain. Some horses may even grunt, kick or rear when the osteopath palpates (manually examines) the painful area. The osteopath palpates the spine to assess pain and symmetry in the back. He also observes the way the horse moves actively on the lunge, in the walk, trot and canter to confirm the diagnosis.

## Why is the sex of the horse important?

Behaviour can be very different between a stallion, gelding and mare, and also between different breeds. Arabian mares and Arabian stallions tend to be different to say Hanoverian mares and Hanoverian stallions, and although there are commonalities, you tend to get different character traits in different breeds. With a female horse you need to consider, just like with a person, things like pregnancy and hormonal changes i.e.: is the mare in season? So yes, breed, discipline, and any previous history are important.

## What kind of treatments are carried out by an Osteopath during a typical consult?

Osteopathy work includes anything from deep tissue work like massage, stretching limbs, articulating the joint (which is gentle

mobilisation), traction and stretching, and segmental manipulation etc. You may manipulate a spinal segment that is out of alignment to help all the soft tissues relax around it, and to help the soft tissue return to normality.

**How long would a consult with an Osteopath take?**

Typically a new patient consultation takes an hour with a horse, and the second time you see it you might spend an hour again, but you tend to do more treatment and less talking because you don't need to take the whole case history again. The second appointment is as important as the first because when you reach a working diagnosis of what you think is going on, it is to see what happens as a result of the first treatment. If the symptoms get worse, or don't change, you may need to revise your diagnosis. It is the same as a doctor prescribing you a drug. They will get you back to see how you got on and they may lower or increase the dosage or change the medication depending on how you react to it. It is the same with osteopathy. Though we are not prescribing medication, we are doing hands on treatment that affects the physiology of the way the horse is working.

**What would be the normal aftercare following osteopathic treatment?**

After care includes advice and follow-up appointments where required. If the osteopath sees that a rider is aggravating a horse's back problem with stiffness on the rein, head tilt, over-collection or an unbalanced seat, he might advise on correct training, exercise, schooling and use of correctly fitting tack and rider position. This can prevent reoccurrences of back problems and other issues.

After a treatment, you can get what is



called a healing crisis, which is not as negative as it may sound. It is a global medical term for the reaction that can happen after treatment. No one can predict what happens after you get a flu injection, or after a massage, or what can happen after you have had your neck manipulated. Some horses will be in tip top condition three hours after a treatment, however, you can experience a healing crisis which is when a body that has been working a certain way, changes. You can get a reaction where you get stiffness or soreness, or something that is uncomfortable, before it settles and gets comfortable. So with regards to horse and people I tend to recommend usually about 48 hours of a more relaxed regime. Sometimes you have to know when to allow a little time to rest in order to improve. **HT**

*To be continued.....*





Osteopathy can be beneficial for many equine conditions including:

**Cold Back • Head Tossing • Sacroiliac Lesion**

**Tendon Injury • Ligament Overstrain • Lameness due to Back Disorder**

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