



EQUINE OSTEOPATHY

(PART 2)

By Sue Akehurst, England

Would you say osteopathy is about prevention, maintenance or cure?

It can be all 3. I have a problem with the word cure however. Prevention; definitely, because if something is functioning well you can approach the patient prior to a potential injury occurring and keep them in good condition. Maintenance; again if there has been a previous problem and you have regular periodic checks you can usually prevent the problem reoccurring. You catch it before it becomes a larger problem. Now, cure; the reason I have a problem with the word "cure" is because what does the word cure really mean? In order to use the word cure you are going to presume that there is an absolute "normal" so when do we say that something is cured? If your neck is stiff and you have osteopathic treatments and you feel great. Are you cured? I would say that you are better than you were, as you are at a level of improvement that you are happy with. "Cure" just seems very black and white. If we use it in terms of finding a cure for a specific disease, absolutely there needs to be a cure, but when you are talking about functional



problems, which is what osteopaths deal with, things can be improved so that there are no signs or symptoms anymore, but you have also got to be aware that without correct management things can come back.

Would a riding-school or hacking pony need less treatment than say a top competition horse?

Usually yes, but for example I regularly visit a yard where they keep 350 Argentinean polo ponies. These are

beautiful horses. When they move their ears you can see the muscles rippling down their back just because they are in such tip-top condition. Similarly last time I went to Badminton I was fortunate enough to be in the horse enclosure, and again these things are supreme athletes, so yes the demands that are placed on them far outweigh anything a riding school horse would be asked to undertake, but the condition is also that much better. I would liken it to someone who is perhaps really out of shape can suddenly get this insidious onset injury from bending down to say pick something up from the floor. At the other end of the scale look at say an Olympic gold medal sprinter, he is probably not going to put his back out in that way, but because of the high demand that he is putting his body under doing his sport he is also very susceptible to injury, so it is as far as it is wide.

Can a rider who is unlevel affect the horse and vice versa?

Yes, very much so, it is important to have both backs checked. In the majority of horse and rider combinations you can get

away with a little imbalance on either side, I am not saying it shouldn't be improved, but a rider could be a little stiff down one side without completely messing-up the way the horse is going and vice versa. But if you are talking about competition horses then the movements and balance become super important.

During treatment there can be various noises and what sound like crunches. What is actually happening and is it expected to hear these noises?

As you get movement over the joints you can sometimes get a sort of popping sound, which is air, like when someone clicks their fingers. It is just a movement of air. When you get a cracking or a crunching of the joints it is known, as crepitus and it can be a degenerative thing. People frequently ask me if it is ok if they click their own joints, fingers being the most common. But it is not, because what tends to happen is that the clicking joints are the most mobile sections, and then they just keep getting more mobile. The parts which, need to be manipulated in order to give a more balanced movement, are not the ones that 'click' when you do it yourself. The more you click your fingers the more you need to, things become a bit of a habit, and eventually you are going to cause wear and tear in the joint which can then cause degenerative conditions. Any sort of manipulation has to be done under the correct conditions, by someone who is trained and understands what they are doing and why.

Could someone watch a few techniques during a treatment and copy it themselves?

No. I think that is a really important point. It would be like doing karaoke. You haven't written the song, rehearsed with the band, or practised it; you are just copying it with the obvious generally poor outcome compared to the original song! The skill and training an osteopath undertakes is so that they understand what they are doing, why they are doing it, what affect it will have and most importantly they know when to use which technique and when not to. Feedback you are getting from the patient affects the choice of treatment method also. I don't mean necessarily verbal feedback. It is very much about what the osteopath is feeling and seeing happen when he is performing the technique. It is a long combination of things that will lead the osteopath to arrive at the decision of which techniques to



use, or to press in this place or move the neck in that way. You cannot buy or copy that sort of information, it takes education and time to understand what is going on underneath and there is no ABC way of doing it.

Do you have in your mind a perfect alignment of a skeletal structure when you are treating?

No, something not being level, and even sometimes works better! To change it can open a whole Pandora's Box of other problems because they were quite comfortable in the first place. There may have been some problem, but suddenly levelling everything adds strains and puts other things out. There isn't a perfect skeletal structure; there isn't a perfect way to be. Of course there are anatomical guidelines of how we perceive things should be, but I think you have to look at the way the subject is going and the job it is doing and weigh up if manipulation could improve its way of working. Manipulation can have dramatic results, which can cause it to be over used almost like a dinner party piece. It is an integral part of what we do but it is only one of the tools in an osteopath's tool-box. A large part of our training is to know how and when to treat, as well as when not to treat.

You also practice in craniosacral therapy, could you explain what that is?

Craniosacral is a very calming technique that really turns down the volume if you

like of the symptoms. The craniosacral rhythm is basically the way the cerebral spinal fluid has its own pulsating motility as it travels from down in the base of the spine up the spinal cord into the brain. The effects of certain craniosacral techniques can have a very relaxing affect on horses and people. I use cranial work with babies and really with the right kind of cranial techniques you can get fractious babies to fall asleep quickly and relax, and suddenly start sleeping better. With horses, I have seen it work really well in calming down very fractious agitated horses, as well as horses that are highly strung. However, that said, sometimes you can get very highly strung stressed out owners wondering why their horse won't stand still. It is not rocket science, you send the owner off to get something and you get someone else in who stands nice and quiet and it is a whole different story.

Why is it that there is traditionally so much focus on the need for good feet, good dentistry, and good saddlers with far less importance placed on the back care in the horse?

That's simple, lack of education. That is all it is. The back is not more important but definitely is as important as all of these things.

The back is taking a lot of strain, and people forget that horses were not designed to be ridden. So if we are to suddenly stick a lump on its back, why aren't we going to look after its back? If you put a saddle on a back which is dysfunctional for some reason, however well fitted the saddle is to the dysfunctional back, it is not going to resolve the issue.

Some of my best referrals, I am happy to say, now come from saddlers, farriers and vets. Farriers, for example, realise that problems in the feet are going to have a reciprocal arrangement in the back. All these things are important. Without correct shoeing you are going to potentially end up with back and musculoskeletal problems. Without the correct saddle or correctly fitted saddle you are going to end up with back and musculoskeletal problems. Without the correct dentistry you can end up with neck problems. Problems in the head carriage as the horse tries to compensate can provoke problems in the temporomandibular joint (the joint of the jaw and is frequently referred to as TMJ). As with us any kind of clenching or discomfort in the jaw area leads to tension in the neck and poll area and right down the neck and into the

withers.

From your study of both the horse and human skeletal structure, what are the benefits or advantages and disadvantages of the two?

Broadly speaking, they both have different pressures placed on the joints of the backs, which is the result of gravity. The difference from being upright to being on all fours. There is a more even weight distribution from being on all fours, ie: in a horse. However, the middle of the spine is more vulnerable in a horse as it has no support. I have attended a lecture on just this subject. It was being given by an engineer who constructed bridges who was applying his knowledge to the structural make up of a horse and people, and it was very interesting. This is such a huge topic and we could really go into all the finite advantages and disadvantages. People, who tend to be upright most of the time, tend to have or develop a lumber curve (the lower back), and can develop a hump in the thoracic spine (between the shoulder blades), which is called a kyphosis caused by excessive strain on the base of your neck.



In horses the most vulnerable area tends to be the mid back and we can certainly argue that that is because we sit on them.

I think one of the greatest anatomical advantages horses have over us is having a tail. Because the tail balances the spine and we as humans should have a tail. If I were to have any kind of plastic surgery I would have a tail fitted! The tail itself would act as a counter balance and take some of the tension out of that lumber

curve. So to sum up, there are different pressures and strains placed on different areas of both for different reasons.

What can we do to help counteract some of the potential problems in our backs?

Quite often you get lower back problems in riders, the lower back being the suspension that absorbs the movement of the horse, keeping the upper body of the rider in a good position. So core stability work is very good for riders. Strengthening this whole section is good and it helps the rider maintain a good position. Pilates is an excellent way to strengthen the core stability muscles.

What would you like to see in the future of the Equine Osteopathy profession?

I would like to see the osteopathic profession continue to grow and develop, and for osteopathy to take on a primary role in equine back care worldwide. I would like to raise the profile and standards of equine back care so it is considered as a routine part of equine care as much as dentistry, shoeing, and saddle fitting. **HT**

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