

Chiropractic Complementary Therapies for Horses



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Article Sophie Love

Welcome to the first in our series of articles investigating the wide range of complementary therapies available to assist our equine partners in maintaining peak physical fitness. We will explore the full range of therapies – from the mundane, the sublime, and the seemingly ridiculous. This will hopefully help you in both crisis and calm to make informed decisions about the best care for your horse.

Every horse owner has the vet's number within arm's reach. Ditto for the farrier and the equine dentist. They are the backbone of every equestrian's life. But what of all the alternatives? Find me a horse person who hasn't at some stage had a bad back and I'll eat my well worn hat! Chiropractic is probably the most easily accepted of all alternative equine therapies. It seems to have been around the longest. Many of us have tales to tell of outback cowboys effecting miraculous cures with a bit of manipulation. But what's the reality?

Leading Sydney Equine Chiropractor, Fiona Lewis, agreed to help me understand just what Chiropractic is and how it can help our equine friends.

Fiona explained that misalignments in either the spine or joints could occur as early as birth. If a mare has a difficult labour, the foal's spine and ribcage are subjected to prolonged pressure, which can easily create an early alignment problem that can cause problems in conformation, lameness, stiffness or early injury. Misalignments can also be caused by poor saddle fit, accidents such as pulling back, slipping, falling or getting cast. We are all experienced at assessing the exterior for damage after

such occurrences, but what of the inner mechanics of the horse? Fiona says that repeated lunging, riding circle work and jumping can also cause spinal and peripheral misalignments.

A misalignment, or restriction, of any vertebral or peripheral joint effectively means that the joint is incapable of fulfilling its normal range of motion. This can cause inflammation; pain; nerve irritation; disc bulge; muscle pain; premature arthritis; muscular imbalance or weakness. Most of these are invisible to the average horse person's untrained eye. While horses often try to tell us there is a problem, we sometimes misread their behaviour and assign it to something else entirely!

For instance, we talk confidently about 'cold back' in horses as if it is a condition in its own right, but it is generally a symptom of an underlying muscular or skeletal problem. Similarly, girthing problems are often treated as sheer naughtiness, but perhaps the horse is trying to tell us he is in pain. And while head shaking may well be allergy or ear related, it may also be due to misalignment of the Temporo Mandibular Joint (jaw) or Atlas or Occiput where the skull connects to the spine.

The great thing about Fiona Lewis is that she is a real horsewoman. Like most chiropractors she is a down-to-earth, practical person who doesn't suffer fools gladly. While she also works with humans and small animals (she can come and fix the whole yard!), she chooses to specialise in horses because they are what she has known all her life. Born and bred on a New Zealand sheep and thoroughbred stud farm, unlike most little girls with Olympic Equestrian dreams, Fiona actually had the ability. She may well have mounted the rostrum as part of the equestrian elite if a sojourn as a showjumping skivvy in the USA hadn't opened her eyes and heart to the level of injury and pain in performance horses, and the potential to be part of the solution, rather than the problem.

Purely in the interests of research (!), I asked Fiona to assess and treat my mare 'Baby'. It is crucial that the person who best knows the history of the horse be present for assessment, not only to fill out a comprehensive form, detailing the horse's history, but also in order to corroborate assessment observations and provide additional information as the need arises during the treatment. I have witnessed with my own eyes the tendency of skeptics, particularly racehorse trainers, to stand back, lips zipped and arms crossed, determined to give nothing away in the 'let's see how much the quack knows, then' stance! This isn't helpful for anyone, particularly the horse!

The Chiropractor should first look at the coat, eye, hoof and attitude of the horse, before asking for walk and trot up to assess gait, movement, muscular development and any obvious skeletal defects. Then they will gently palpate the horse down the spine and around the joints and limbs in order to accurately assess any abnormalities and the best method for rectification. At this juncture, Fiona will also use massage and acupressure in order to facilitate muscular release and assist with the manipulations.

Fiona immediately found the spot on my mare's back that I had always imagined being her weakest link. I couldn't provide any information about how that might have occurred, but Fiona said it was the underlying root of all her gait problems (left hind not following through, right hind externally rotating on contact with ground) and difficulty in going downhill etc. On palpation she discovered restriction in the right lateral flexion of the lumbar spine (no WONDER she always goes one way so much easier than the other!) and restrictions at C4, C7, T5, T10, T15 and L2, also at the right sacroiliac. She also found extreme tenderness in the pectoral muscles laterally (highly unusual in a retired horse), which in Chinese medicine is related to the lung meridian (more in our article on