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Acupuncture Therapies for Horses

Article & Photos Sophie Love

Considering how much most horses hate the vet's needles, the idea of turning them into an equine pin cushion might seem like a recipe for disaster. But what if it really works and addresses deep-rooted physical issues in the horse that reflect in his conformation, posture, self-carriage, digestion, flexion and movement?

Many humans shy away from acupuncture because they 'don't like needles' but acupuncture uses very different needles to a doctor. These are incredibly fine, disposable, site specific needles and they really and truly don't hurt! Certainly my spooky mare was a docile old donkey both during and after needle insertion, and she has been happier, sounder and stronger in lung since our trial.

Leading Sydney Equine Acupuncturist, Fiona Lewis, helped me to understand exactly what Acupuncture is, and how it can help horses by facilitating their own natural healing mechanism.

Acupuncture is one of the world's oldest systems of health care. It is a part of an integrated system called Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which can be traced back through thousands of years in China and Asia and relies on natural remedies, working with the body's key organs, to promote optimum health.

The Traditional Chinese Medicine body map looks very different from the ones we are used to seeing on our doctor's walls. Instead of delineating muscular and skeletal structures,

it maps meridians and key energy points. The core belief of TCM is that a healthy body has an abundant flow of energy or qi (pronounced 'chee'), which flows through these meridians, or energy channels. If the flow becomes blocked, or there is an inadequate supply of qi, then the body fails to maintain harmony and balance and illness, disease or dysfunction naturally follow. So the whole point of TCM, including Acupuncture, is to assess where these blockages have occurred and stimulate the point of restriction (stagnation) so that the energy can flow freely once more.

It's a bit like your drains or your gutting—when everything's working as it should, you don't even think about it. But as soon as one of those pipes gets blocked, everyone in the household knows about it!

TCM practitioners are trained to view the body, mind, and spirit as one system, as opposed to Western medicine practitioners, who are taught to regard each of these elements as separate. Despite TCM's dramatically different approach, Westerners have been drawn to its practice because of its emphasis on healing the whole person and seeking the root cause of illness. The great thing about Acupuncture is that it takes the onus off the patient and allows the practitioner to provoke dramatic change in energy levels, movement, experience of pain and general wellbeing in just one session... imagine what you could do in six!

Human Acupuncturists assess the flow of qi by feeling the energy pulses which can give up

to 12 different readings (Liver and Gallbladder, Heart & Small Intestine, Kidney & Bladder, Stomach & Spleen, Lungs & Colon, Pericardium & TB) as well as by looking in the eyes, at the skin and the tongue. With horses they carefully assess eyes, hoof, coat colour and shine as well posture and reaction to palpation of acupuncture points, which is normally diagnostic.

Fiona explains that the coat, dung and tender stomach acupuncture points are the best indicators of digestive problems and says that looking at the tongue gives an indication of blood stasis. She also says that she doesn't always check equine patient's pulses, but uses the other key indicators as well as gait and freedom of movement to assess where energy is blocked and acupuncture can best assist in the free flow of qi.

In addition to palpation and visual assessment, Fiona takes a detailed patient history; so make sure that the human holding the horse for the session knows every detail of diet, accidents, falls, habits etc.

She pinpointed my mare's pain reaction in her chest area as relating to lungs which I was able to confirm have been weak ever since she flew from the UK to Australia. She also indicated her lumbar/sacral region as tight and stiff and placed a number of needles there as well as in the stifle and lung region. 'Baby' stood stock still throughout. Fiona's extensive experience with horses and equine understanding really inspires confidence in both owner/handler and horse patient.

The horse is then left to stand with the needles in place for about 15 minutes for optimum results. Baby just dozed peacefully while we chatted about the benefits of this radically different approach to equine health. Fiona says, 'Acupuncture is a truly natural form of healing which provides drug-free pain relief; effectively treats a wide range of acute and chronic ailments; treats the underlying causes of illness and disease as well as the symptoms; assists in preventing illness and disease and promoting peak performance and wellbeing'.

As with humans, it is often a chronic imbalance or illness or acute pain, which nothing seems to alleviate that forces us to find alternative solutions. The same goes for equine care, although many of Australia's leading racehorse trainers have incorporated regular treatment into their charge's fitness routines with quite exceptional results. Fiona says she often sees a new horse patient after surgery or injury when the owner is desperate for solutions to pain and looking for the fastest healing solution. Once the crisis is over, even the most skeptical horse owners are convinced of the benefits and book regular sessions to keep their equine partners in tip-top condition.

So don't let your own fear of needles interfere with your horse's wellbeing and ask around about an equine Acupuncturist in your area.

Fiona Lewis treats humans, horses and small animals throughout the Sydney Metropolitan area and can travel to outlying areas for group bookings. Fiona has a Bachelor of Applied Sciences Degree in Acupuncture and over ten years experience in treating a wide range of performance horses. You can contact Fiona on 0425 242 448 and at www.fionalewis.com.au.

1. The needles are extremely fine and inserted into areas of blockage or pain
2. The needles are rotated slightly to optimise flow of energy to the site
3. The Equine Pin Cushion!
4. Inserting needles is an exacting science taking years of training and experience
5. As above