

Equine Acupuncture: Let's Get To the Point

By Dr. Allen Schoen

A dismayed owner, standing next to her prize dressage stallion, explains to her veterinarian how he has refused to take his right lead for the past two weeks. After careful examination of the problem, the doctor takes out what looks like a writing pen and applies a delicate pressure technique to a point on the horse's shoulder. The veterinarian then inserts acupuncture needles into specific points on the horse's body. For the rest of the show season, the horse takes the correct leads.

The word "acupuncture" has raised, and lowered, many horsemen's eyebrows recently. Some people swear by it, others shake their heads. Regardless of the reaction, acupuncture has been a great interest in the equine industry.

Acupuncture (acus - needle, punctura - puncture) is defined as a technique for treating certain painful conditions. It produces regional anesthesia by passing long, thin needles (or other forms of pressure) through the skin to specific points. It stimulates these points on the body to alter various biochemical and physiological conditions in order to achieve a desired effect.

"It is not a panacea, a cure-all," states Dr. Allen Schoen of Veterinary Acupuncture and Alternative Therapies in Sherman, Connecticut, "but where it is indicated it works well."

The history of equine acupuncture dates back to the years 2000-3000 BC during the Shang and Chow dynasties in China. Interestingly, one of the first veterinary textbooks, "Bai-le's Canon of Veterinary Medicine" written around 650 B.C., was based primarily on acupuncture and its derivatives. It has been known in the Far East for centuries but has received little attention by Western equine practitioners until the past decade.

"Acupuncture is actually the treatment of choice for one-quarter of the world's population," Dr. Schoen states, "which is surprising when acupuncture is theoretically considered a natural occurring phenomena. No one mechanism can explain all the physiological effects observed. This lack of concrete explanation causes some to disbelieve and doubt acupuncture's validity."

However, acupuncture is being utilized by an increasing number of veterinarians for various conditions. Many reputable equine associations have supported acupuncture as a sound, veterinary treatment. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), for example, considers acupuncture a "valid modality" and its "techniques should be regarded as surgical and/or medical procedures." The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) also considers acupuncture a valid modality and has formed a Task Force on Therapeutic Options to consider the value of acupuncture and other practices.

The organizations grant, however, that the potential for abuse of acupuncture and related therapies exists. They recommend that extensive research and education be upheld to ensure competent acupuncture therapists and that acupuncture only be practiced by a licensed veterinarian. If there is no one, simple explanation, then why do people use and support acupuncture? Because there is proof that it works. Traditional Chinese medical theories have documented these effects for 4000 years based on empirical observations and descriptions.

Many horse owners appreciate the naturalness and safety of acupuncture. Side effects are rare. No drugs or chemical substances ever enter the body. In the Western world, it is used primarily when surgery is not feasible, or when medications are not working or could not be used due to possible side effects.

"Because acupuncture balances the body's own system of healing, complications rarely, if ever, develop," states Dr. Schoen. "It bridges the gap between medicine and surgery. It is a means by which the body can heal itself."

For those who must see proof before they believe, acupuncture has been used to treat hundreds of ailments. In small animals, acupuncture is most commonly used for such disorders as hip dysplasia, arthritis, lick granulomas, certain types of paralysis and feline asthma. In horses, back problems, navicular disease, founder (laminitis), "bleeders" (heaves) and many types of lameness have been treated using acupuncture.

There is a scientific explanation. Essentially, a domino effect occurs. Applied pressure on a specific point on the skin stimulates various sensory receptors (pain, temperature, pressure and touch). These receptors then stimulate sensory afferent nerves, or nerves that transmit impulses from the outer body to the central nervous system (CNS). These nerves send a signal to the CNS and then to the hypothalamus-pituitary glands which are responsible for releasing neuro-transmitters and "natural pain-killing" hormones.

These substances cause subsequent effects throughout the body. They increase circulation, relieve muscle spasms, stimulate nerves and the body defense system and cause other numerous beneficial results.

Therapeutic effects are produced only when specific, predetermined points on the body are stimulated. These points designate areas of increased electrical sensitivity. Selection is based on locating points on the body where stimulation will produce a beneficial change in the CNS by adjusting ongoing physiological activity.

Specifically, acupuncture points, or acupoints, correspond to four known neural structures; they are explained as the following:

Type I makes up 67 percent of all acupoints. They are considered motor points, which are located near the point where the nerve enters the muscle. **Type II** are located on the superficial nerves along the top of the back (dorsal line) and midline of the belly. **Type III** are located at highly dense points of outer nerves, or network of nerves, such as the lower limb. **Type IV** are located within a tendon where a spindle-shaped sensory end organ provides information about muscle tension to the brain.

How are these points stimulated? Many people think of tiny needles sticking out of the skin when they picture acupuncture. It is traditionally performed with sterilized thin stainless steel needles and, contrary to many beliefs, the process involves no pain.

"There is occasionally a brief moment of sensitivity as the needle penetrates the skin in certain sensitive areas," Dr. Schoen explains. "However, once the needles are in place, most animals relax, often falling asleep during treatment." Treatments usually last from five to 30 minutes. Patients are often treated one to two times week until the desired effect is seen.

There are actually many modes, other than the traditional dry needle method, to stimulate acupoints. Alternate stimulants of acupuncture include electroacupuncture, aquapuncture, moxibustion (use of heat and combustion), laser stimulation, gold implants and acupressure.

People sometimes confuse acupuncture with other forms of alternative therapy. Chiropractic methods, for example, are often mistaken for acupuncture. This type of therapy is based upon the relationship between the animal body, spinal column and the nervous system. It does not involve stimulation through acupoints.

The Lameness Dilemma : The equine practice has recently related acupuncture to one of its most perplexing and troublesome disorders: lameness. Both the equine public and medical community seem to be hungry for a "magical solution" or "cure-all," especially when dealing with unsoundness. Yet, they seem skeptical of anything new or unfamiliar.

"Acupuncture is an excellent diagnostic aid as an adjunct to our conventional lameness examination," states Dr. Schoen. "It may not tell you exactly where the lameness is or what the etiology is, but it does indicate that something is reactive in that region."

During an equine lameness exam, a certified practitioner will palpate particular acupoints. Reaction to this palpation corresponds with specific conditions. For example, suppose a veterinarian feels sensitivity along the bladder meridian lateral to the dorsal midline along the back (a point on the back right above the flank). This may indicate that there is a hindlimb lameness related to the stifle or hock, a primary back problem related to the saddle fit or seat position of a rider, or a conformational problem.

The veterinarian will also look for trigger points, which are knots or tight bands in the muscle. For instance, when a lower forelimb lameness is present, a triceps trigger point will become quite sensitive to palpation.

"Since each diagnostic acupuncture point may have four or five meanings," Dr. Schoen states, "it is always recommended that a certified veterinarian perform acupuncture to determine proper diagnosis."

Acupuncture can be a very valuable tool, therefore, in an equine lameness exam that includes flexion tests, diagnostic nerve blocks, radiographs, ultrasounds and fluoroscopy. But it can also be used in various muscle conditions. For example, suppose a horse was injected with an intra-articular substance and, though the horse is not lame, seems to be "off." Acupuncture may be used to treat secondary problems of the hock such as neck and back disorders.

"Acupuncture enables the veterinarian to treat the primary cause as well as secondary consequences," Dr. Schoen added. "Both the horse and the owner are happy."

Tips for Successful Acupuncture Therapy : Dr. Allen Schoen from Veterinary Acupuncture and Alternative Therapies, suggests the following tips for successful acupuncture therapy: **1.** Be sure the therapist is a veterinarian certified by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS). **2.** Before treating your horse, check with your regular veterinarian first. Discuss all options. **3.** Never replace good management with acupuncture. Integrate proper saddle fit, riding and shoeing for your horse at all times.

To read more on the subject, consult "Love, Miracles and Animal Healing," 1995, written by Dr. Allen Schoen and published by Simon and Schuster.

For more information on certification, you may contact: IVAS Box 142 The Mail Station 1750-30th St. Boulder, CO, 80301