

Natural Medicine, Your Horse, Welfare and the Law ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE

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Natural methods of healing have enjoyed a tremendous burst of popularity in recent years and justifiably so. Many chronic conditions, for which conventional medicine can at best only offer pain-killing anti-inflammatory drugs, can be amenable to treatment or cure by [homeopathy](#), [acupuncture](#), [herbs](#) or other therapies. Acute illnesses or injuries can be treated appropriately and effectively by natural means and, in the hands of the confident, even spasmodic colic will respond without the need for spasmolytic drugs. In the manipulative field, chiropractors are achieving great results in helping horses' [backs](#) to better health. After the 1st January, a further accidental boost will be provided from the EC. Food-producing animals and yes, horses do come under that definition in EC law, must not be given drugs that are not permitted for human consumption. Natural medicine is able to find ways of healing which do not contravene these laws and treatments can continue without hindrance.

I have been very happy to promote natural medicine over my twenty-five years of practice and have been delighted to witness the burgeoning popularity, well deserved, of such gentle, effective, logical and well-tried therapies. I am concerned, however, about the rapid proliferation of those who, without qualification, training or proper grounding, are advertising their (often illegal) services for the unwary, thus jumping on the bandwagon. Some distressing cases have recently come to light, prompting me to write this article because of the suffering caused by the involvement of such persons. I hope that, in putting pen to paper, I shall draw the attention of caring horse owners to this problem, helping them to realise the potential dangers involved and to understand the wider perspective. Two of the most disturbing cases I shall summarise briefly here.

- The first was a horse with a fracture of the elbow, for whom a non-veterinary homeopath prescribed. Without even seeing the horse, he advised withholding the vet's conventional pain killers. He also reversed the attending vet's decision to confine the animal and sent 'homeopathic'

medicines. The horse was subsequently seen dragging its front leg around the field and paid for this intervention with its life.

- In another case, a cushingoid cobby type was suffering laminitis and had been treated by a vet. A non-veterinary homeopath took the horse off the drugs suddenly, sending unlabelled 'homeopathic' medicines for it. Again the horse had not even been seen by this person. The horse suffered a fearsome backlash from coming off the drugs and was only saved from being put down by rapid restoration of veterinary intervention and subsequent proper natural medicine help from a qualified veterinary surgeon. This case is still ongoing and we hope for an eventual happy outcome but that is not yet a foregone conclusion.

In our practice we use many different forms of natural therapies including homeopathy, acupuncture, herbs, [bach flowers](#), [aromatherapy](#) etc., since each has its own benefits and different abilities. Such a spread of therapies results in a very effective, all-round armoury, provided they are properly integrated when used in combination. This is, of course perfectly legal and the vet is covered by professional indemnity insurance, as with all veterinary work carried out by more conventional, qualified veterinary surgeons. There are other vets using natural therapies and who also practice perfectly legally and are covered by indemnity insurance, as required by our profession. That is the obviously legal end of the market. If, in addition, veterinary surgeons have special qualifications recognised by the Faculty of Homeopathy, by the International Association for Veterinary Homeopathy or by the International Association of Veterinary Acupuncture, then one knows that they not only have an *interest* in natural medicine but have *committed* themselves, both in time and money, to a basic period of study and teaching and have taken relevant examinations, at great personal cost, in order to show that they have reached that basic standard.

What of other non-veterinary practitioners, however? Are they legal? They are being increasingly consulted, as a result of consumer awareness of natural methods, as a result of owners' suspicion of the use of manufactured chemicals in their animals and because supply of those qualified vets using natural medicine who also do any quantity of horse work is very limited indeed. Those horse owners who are seeking such help for their animals are clearly very well-meaning and have their horse's best interests at heart. However, there are many traps and pitfalls for the unwary or uninformed. The answer to the second question lies in the [Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966](#). This Act of Parliament makes it illegal for any person without a veterinary qualification (or person who is not MRCVS) to practise veterinary surgery, defined for the purposes of the Act as

"The art and science of veterinary surgery and medicine and, without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, shall be taken to include:

- a. the diagnosis of diseases in, and injuries to, animals, including tests performed on animals for diagnostic purposes;*

- b. the giving of advice based upon such diagnosis;*
- c. the medical or surgical treatment of animals; and*
- d. the performance of surgical operations on animals."*

Where does that leave the plethora of back people, herbal suppliers, homeopaths, radionics practitioners, therapists and others who use their methods on animals? How can one decide upon whether to use their services or not?

If it is your horse's back that you feel needs attention, then there are **qualified** animal chiropractors (McTimony) who have undergone very serious training for a number of years in anatomy and in proper techniques, and who will display their qualification to all who enquire.

These practitioners are bound by a code which demands that they operate legally, (i.e. with proper referral from a veterinary surgeon and under the supervision of that veterinary surgeon - if they do not follow this procedure, they are strictly illegal). They also carry insurance in most cases. Osteopaths are also attending to animals. Proper animal qualification is advisable and similar veterinary collaboration is required in their case too. There are also properly qualified [physiotherapists](#) who will operate legally via veterinary surgeons (under similar conditions) and who do good supportive work for horses. It must be said that, currently, many physiotherapists, chiropractors and osteopaths are breaking the law, by not following the correct channels. In most cases, no harm arises from this. If they have indemnity insurance, however, it may be void under such circumstances. I have even known some who will perform Acupuncture, a form of medicine which very definitely comes under the provisions of the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

There are, sadly, a great many back people (some of whom are great showmen and who are not only proud of their lack of training or qualification but who also may achieve national publicity in magazines, which do not check their credentials) who not only operate totally illegally but do so at great risk to your horse's welfare and health. In the case of back pain, which you experience yourself, you can take yourself to such people and, if the experience proves unpleasant or dangerous, you can refuse to go again. Sadly your horse does not have this option or safeguard, nor is there any insurance or redress should something go horribly wrong. The one who has to bear the greatest cost of this potential disaster is your horse. It has sadly often been my lot to visit horses that have been treated by one or other spurious and self-styled 'back person', only to find that the horses show great distress at any threatened attention to their backs. It takes several sessions and a long time before the animal's trust is regained. Some of these people, too, will take it upon themselves to perform Acupuncture, quite illegally and with no training.

The practice of farriery has, of course, long been properly regulated and does not therefore come under the subject of this article. Equine Dentistry is an evolving science and practice which also seems to be progressing down a route of ethical involvement similar to other properly regulated disciplines. It is wise, however, to consult a veterinary surgeon as to who is and who is not of sufficient standard to be able to help your horse.

Radionics practitioners do not 'administer' medicines to your horse and do not commit an act of veterinary surgery in terms of the Veterinary Surgeons Act. The ethical ones restrict their diagnosis to detecting disturbances in energy balance and how that affects mind and body, not making specific diagnoses. They therefore operate legally at present but you are advised to consult only those who are approved by a *bona fide* organisation. Where some of the less scrupulous ones move over into illegality is when they sell medicines on the back of their diagnosis and thereby enhance their profits. This prescribing and selling of medicines is strictly illegal and often the medicines are unlabelled, resulting in total confusions, should you wish to treat your own horse or to seek help from a homeopathically-qualified vet at a later date.

Outside these groups, there are no standards, no controls, no legal structure and many practitioners operate illegally. Non-veterinary herbalists, homeopaths, acupuncturists, physical therapists of many kinds, all operate illegally if they treat animals. Furthermore, they carry no indemnity insurance in order to make amends if anything were to go wrong. This would not, of course, help the horse but would ease the consequent financial burden. It is salutary to note that consulting such people for your horse could even expose you to the rigours of the [Protection of Animals Act 1911](#)*, should their interaction either prove of no help in alleviating the suffering of your horse or result in further suffering, for you have failed to consult a qualified veterinary surgeon to administer properly to your animal and it was your own voluntary decision to go down that route.

The Veterinary Surgeons Act may seem a very blunt tool and, to support that view, it is certain that not all veterinary intervention is beneficial nor is all non-veterinary intervention harmful. However, when drawing up legislation, certain benchmarks are required. A minimum standard of training, i.e. minimum exposure to education about animal disease and its treatment and a minimal amount of education in the diagnosis of disease, are the very basics which your horse is entitled to expect of those who would seek to intervene on health matters. The veterinary qualification appears to satisfy these criteria with its five or six years of full-time training. Furthermore, specialist postgraduate qualifications **within** the profession equip a veterinary surgeon to branch out from his or her conventional mould and apply other methods effectively, safely and humanely. Other non-veterinary practitioners, as mentioned previously, who have given a time and money commitment to training and proper qualification for work on animals, and

who work legally with the cooperation of veterinary surgeons, are also deserving of basic trust, where the welfare of your horse is concerned. Furthermore, under these circumstances you and your horse will be covered by the referring veterinary surgeons and their indemnity insurance.

Shopping outside these parameters, while often appearing cheaper at first glance, seems to me to be a dangerous lottery and to be putting the health and welfare of your horse at unnecessary, unjustifiable and even possibly culpable risk. This even includes buying off-the-shelf medicinal products which carry spurious, unsupported, implied medical claims on the label or in the publicity. How can such products be assumed safe, beneficial or even legal (for administration to the food animal your horse has become under EC law without proper control)? How can they be assumed compatible with any internal medication given by your own vet, whether he or she is supplying alternative or conventional medicine? Off-the-shelf herbal compounds are not necessarily safe and cannot be tailored to your horse's individual needs without proper diagnosis and prescribing. Cartilage precursors used as anti-arthritis agents may contain animal products (e.g. rendered calf or horse cartilage tissues or shark products) which cannot be considered suitable, safe, philosophically sound or even ethical to feed to a herbivore. Many supplements for health enhancement or hoof growth can contain gelatin or other animal-derived ingredients and the same applies. Many supplements which are dubbed natural may not be wholly so and their manufacturing and medicinal effects have not been properly scrutinised or safety-tested. Many foods or supplements contain unsuitable ingredients and even products of genetic-engineering without any legal requirement for proper labelling which could act as a safeguard and would give you, the consumer, an informed choice (e.g. some modern yeast supplements spring to mind here). At the least damaging but nonetheless disappointing end of the spectrum, some supplements contain very little of the ingredient you intend to buy (e.g. Garlic) and a large proportion of 'carrier' material. This hardly seems to be fair trading.

In the interests of economy, many people seek postal help for their horses or even telephone advice. Can this be seen as responsible or sensible? In most cases the prescriber is acting illegally if unqualified, quasi-legally in the case of pharmacists and in contravention of the accepted codes of ethical practice in the case of those veterinary surgeons who do so. How can one prescribe without proper examination of the patient? How can one attend to all the factors which may be adversely affecting a horse, without first-hand knowledge of those and without proper enquiry?

If this article appears a little harsh and uncompromising the author trusts that the reader will understand that it is written against the backdrop of the two recent and very serious animal welfare disasters mentioned, which have arisen from the intervention of postal homeopathic help from a non-veterinary 'homeopath'. Such

vivid and distressing cases serve to bring home the harsh realities of life and highlight the ethical and moral issues involved better than any theoretical treatise. No veterinary surgeon is infallible, but all have given a great deal of their lives to study and to qualification and have sworn an oath to uphold the welfare of animals under their care. That is not to be taken lightly.

Clearly we have the right to consume spurious medicines ourselves without safeguards. Clearly we are entitled to seek the attention of an unqualified, self-styled bone man or cosmetic surgeon or any other operator for our own bodies. Do we have the right, however, to subject our horses to such reckless practice? Common sense says no; long-term economic considerations say no; ethics and reason say no and the law says no.

* One provision of this Act defines the following as constituting cruelty, punishable by a fine or imprisonment: *"To cause unnecessary suffering by doing or omitting to do any act"*. (N.B. Since this article was written, the legislation is now the [Animal Welfare Act 2006](#))

Christopher Day (holistic vet, homeopathic vet and acupuncture vet) - 1997

Christopher Day qualified from Cambridge University and Veterinary School in 1972. He was introduced to homeopathy in his early teens and started using it on some of his patients from the outset of his veterinary career. This use increased rapidly as years went by. This interest in natural medicine led him to take up acupuncture, having studied abroad, and he now uses these two medical systems, in conjunction with other "alternatives", in his holistic medicine practice. Nutrition is a mainstay of his holistic work.

He is Hon. Secretary of the British Association of Homoeopathic Veterinary Surgeons and Veterinary Dean to the Faculty of Homeopathy. He is actively involved in teaching and clinical research and treats all species with natural medicine. He is course leader for a school of veterinary homeopathy near Oxford, run by the Homeopathic Physicians Teaching Group.

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