

The Blanket



What's New (and Old) in Alternative Therapies

More than ever, horse owners look to alternative or complementary therapies as veterinarians integrate these modalities into their practices or refer clients to competent practitioners.

BY NICOLE KITCHENER

Some of the less-conventional therapies described in this article are newer and perhaps unfamiliar, while others, although centuries-old, are now gaining traction in equine health. Of course, these or any other treatments should never replace traditional veterinary care or be performed without prior advice from, or in consultation with, a veterinarian.

Equi-Bow Canada

Equi-Bow is a bodywork program and system of owner training and practitioner qualification/certification designed by Canadians Cheryl Gibson and Simone Usselman-Tod.

Equi-Bow is a “neuromuscular re-patterning technique,” explains

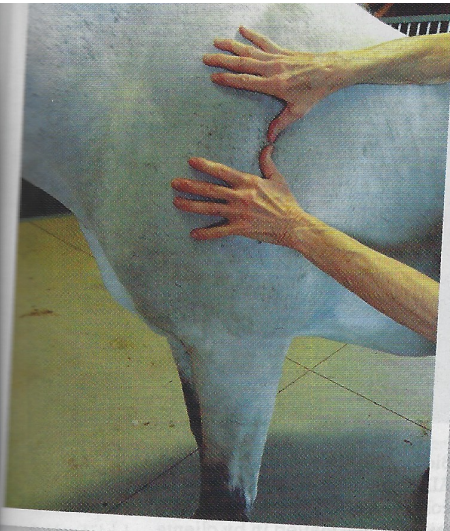
Gibson. Rolling-type touches, often corresponding to acupressure and trigger points, bring awareness to restricted areas in muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints. The brain processes the information and sends impulses to help the body realign itself, she says.

Another major benefit is “rebalancing the autonomic nervous system” adds Gibson. “Much like humans, horses may exist in a state of almost perpetual anxiety, which adversely affects their entire system. When we think that the autonomic nervous system governs about 80 per cent of bodily functions, it’s important to provide a way for the sympathetic [fright/flight] response to balance with the parasympathetic [rest/digest] response.”

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The bodywork system Equi-Bow eases horses out of their 'alarm state' and rebalances the autonomic nervous system to improve functions from digestion to movement.

Gibson says Equi-Bow has shown clear clinical evidence of affecting digestion, respiration, and lymphatic system function, improving posture, facilitating optimal movement, releasing persistent tensions, and softening scar tissue and adhesions.

"The list goes on," Gibson says. "I often think that if Equi-Bow simply took animals out of the 'alarm' state, it would be well worth it, but it accomplishes a multitude of other benefits in a surprisingly non-invasive and gentle way."

Light Therapy

Low-level laser therapy (LLLT, or cold-laser therapy) uses low-power red and near-infrared wavelengths of light on injuries or wounds to improve soft tissue healing and relieve acute and chronic pain, explains animal natural health specialist Jessie McCowan. She

uses LLLT among many other healing modalities in her practice, which serves the area north of Toronto, ON.

During treatment, a portable battery- or electric-powered handheld unit is applied to the skin on the affected area. Highly condensed beams of light enter underlying tissues in a single beam (commonly used instead of needles to stimulate acupuncture points) or pulses.

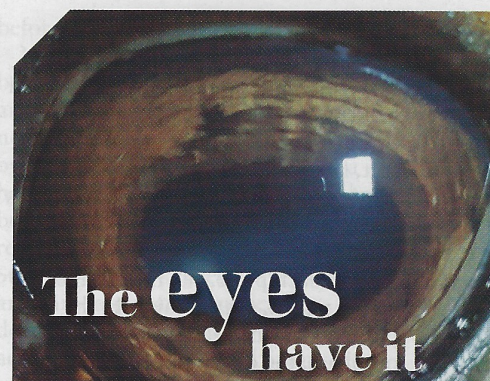
"Because of the low power nature of these lasers, the effects are biochemical and not thermal and, therefore, can't cause heat damage to tissue," says McCowan. "When low-level laser light waves penetrate deeply into the skin, they optimize the immune responses of the horse's blood. This has both anti-inflammatory and immunosuppressive effects by supplying vital oxygen and energy to every cell."

McCowan says the five primary benefits of LLLT are speeding of tissue repair; increased collagen formation; production of the body's natural painkillers; improved lymphatic drainage; and increased development of blood vessels.

Earlier this year, Polish veterinarians from the Wroclaw University of Environmental and Life Sciences published an overview of laser therapy research, noting that while its use is very important in human physiotherapy, in veterinary medicine it's "new, and so far, poorly examined." Despite minimal standardized testing parameters related to wavelength, energy dose and number and frequency of treatments, the review says equine study results are overall "very promising" and that interest is growing among veterinarians because light therapy is non-invasive, safe, simple, and low-cost.



LLLT, or cold-laser therapy, improves healing of soft-tissue injuries and alleviates pain.



The eyes have it

Unconventional methods are also being brought into use as diagnostic tools. One such method is iridology, the science of assessing an animal's health and emotional state by analyzing the fibre structure, colour, and markings of the iris of the eye. According to Jessie McCowan, "The iris records information about the state and function of every organ and gland in the body, as well as levels of inflammation and toxicity."

Discovered by the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates more than 2,500 years ago, iridology was modernized in the late 1970s and thereafter adapted for animals. The equine iridology grid, invented by California holistic practitioner Dr. Mercedes Colburn in the 1980s, "maps" parts of the iris to various body systems. Practitioners use magnifying glasses, flashlights, and specially-designed digital cameras to facilitate investigation. McCowan says iridology is used to assess health pre-purchase, to appraise breeding or competition value, and determine underlying physical problems manifesting into behavioural issues.

Pulsed Electromagnetic Field (PEMF) Therapy

PEMF sends a pulsing magnetic field from a portable mechanical device through copper wire contained in a soft, flexible rubber coil tube up to 40 centimetres long into body tissues, says Keely Gibb, owner of Cavallo Pulse Therapy in Alberta.

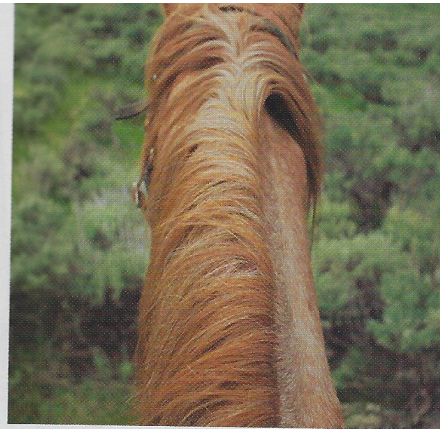
With each pulse, cell membranes are gently pulled, she explains. In the off-pulse phase, the cell is relaxed; in the on-phase, the cell becomes stimulated and expands. Through the process it's believed the cell membrane becomes more permeable, allowing the cell to better absorb oxygen and nutrients while releasing waste and toxins.

During a session, the coil is moved over the horse's body. Areas of soreness or damage are identifiable because "they are the only ones that show pulsing or twitching," says Gibb. The coil is then held in those problem areas for two to three minutes, depending on the severity of the pulsing.

Gibb says PEMF can be used for health maintenance and treating injuries, increasing energy, relieving pain, decreasing inflammation, repairing and regenerating damaged or diseased tissue, and accelerating bone and wound healing.

Horses find it relaxing and enjoyable, Gibb adds. "Lots of licking, yawning and stretching. Even the riders enjoy their own treatment."

Very little scientific research has been done on PEMF in animals, but many studies (2,000 or more) have been published related to its use in human medicine. It's particularly well-known as a bone fracture treatment.



Bioenergetics company Equine Allergenius tests for certain stressors and collects DNA biofeedback from mane and tail samples mailed in by clients.



PEMF therapy, well-known in human medicine for repairing bone, is used to decrease pain and inflammation, heal tissue and bone, and boost energy in horses.

Bioenergetics

Bioenergetics (BIE) considers that every substance possesses a unique vibrational frequency – an electromagnetic "signature." If the body doesn't recognize a substance upon exposure, allergy-like reactions can result, explains Ontario BIE practitioner Julie Tibbles. BIE works to reintroduce the signatures of various stressors, allowing the body's cells to achieve a more balanced state and ultimately symptom relief.

Tibbles began doing BIE on humans about five years ago, expanding into horses with her company Equine Allergenius after her daughter Abby began riding lessons on a horse with a persistent cough. The owner and trainer told Tibbles that Whinny had allergies. Turns out, his problem was dust.

"I tried testing and working with Whinny and right away he had great results. I believe we did four sessions and he's been fine ever since."

Tibbles does biofeedback analysis testing where the horse is exposed to small vials of potential stressors (i.e. dust, plants, hormones). Using a surrogate (usually the



The Integration of Alternatives

Chiropractic and acupuncture – a couple of decades ago considered outlier therapies – are now deemed by most horse people as mainstream. While owners discovered these modalities relieved their own ailments and conditions, they began to happily invest in treatments for their pleasure and performance horses, and more veterinarians have begun offering them as part of their regular services. Veterinarians are also growing more comfortable with combining conventional veterinary care and therapies that now generally fall under the designation "integrative medicine" – proof of the opening of minds that follows the human health-care model.

According to the provinces' respective veterinary acts, it's illegal for lay people to perform chiropractic or acupuncture unless they can show appropriate training and the horse was referred to them by a veterinarian. Both doctors of chiropractic (DCs) and veterinary medicine (DVMs) are able to take additional training to become certified in veterinary chiropractic. The primary certifier in North America is the Animal Chiropractic Certification Commission (ACCC) of the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association (AVCA). Earning certification from the ACCC requires attending an ACCC-approved animal chiropractic program followed by ACCC written and clinical examinations.

owner or trainer) who touches the vials/stressors to the horse, Tibbles muscle tests the person to determine what the animal could be reacting to. It's believed muscle weakness can indicate exposure to certain allergens. Once possible stressors are identified, they are reintroduced using a small machine that touches different acupressure points on the body. "This allows the body to recognize things it didn't recognize before and the body stops reacting to them."

Tibbles also recently introduced DNA biofeedback testing whereby clients mail in samples of their horse's tail or mane hair. Tibbles places the hair on a test plate and, based on information the owner provides about the horse, she tests for certain stressors. If there's a resistance to the stressor's vibrational frequency "then there's likely a reaction to it," explains Tibbles. She then creates and mails back a unique homeopathic remedy and a detailed report of the testing. After two weeks, she performs a retest and a new remedy is prepared. This is done three times, allowing the body to "recalibrate" its response to the stressors, deal with them in a balanced state and relieve symptoms.

Bach Flower Remedies

Renowned physician Dr. Edward Bach concluded almost 80 years ago that his patients' illnesses were directly related to their negative states of mind, explains McCowan. "Flower essences are a safe, natural method of wellness treatment. These are dilute infusions of flowers and tree buds that can improve the mental state, which then influences the physical state."

Drops are given orally – in feed or applied on a carrot – a few times a day.



Bach flower remedies containing diluted essences of rock rose, clematis, cherry plum, star of Bethlehem, impatiens and others are administered for their calming effects.

Flower essences are most commonly used to help horses with issues of aggression, fear, depression, lack of confidence, separation anxiety, hyperactivity, and concentration. "Essences can be especially helpful during or after a traumatic experience such as a thunderstorm, an aggressive encounter with another animal, loss of an owner or friend, injuries, surgery, etc."

Essential Oils

Essential oils have been used for centuries for medicinal, cosmetic, and religious purposes. These natural volatile (easily turned into vapour or gas) aromatic compounds "are found in seeds, bark, stems, roots, flowers, and other parts of plants; they protect plants against environmental threats as well as provide beneficial properties," says McCowan. Oils are placed directly on the horse, inhaled, or occasionally placed in feed. She advises using only certified pure therapeutic grade oils. "Essential oils are highly concentrated when distilled for purity, potency, and efficacy, and are always diluted properly

before use aromatically or topically."

McCowan says essential oils have been shown to improve several ailments and behavioural issues. While there's no scientific research on iridology or Bach flower remedies in horses, a handful of studies on essential oils have been performed. For example, 2012 research out of Louisiana's McNeese State University suggests lavender aromatherapy can "significantly decrease" a horse's heart rate after an acute stress response. And Spanish researchers investigating nine essential oils, determined oregano and thyme could be used to control a type of bacteria that affects a horse's skin and mucous membranes.

Essential oils, including lavender, thyme, oregano, eucalyptus, tea tree, lemongrass, sage, basil, rosemary, geranium, and a host of others, are used to improve ailments and behavioural issues.



NICOLE KITCHENER PHOTO

Research Roadblocks

"For the past 100 years, medicine has been about specialization. Integrative medicine is a complete 180. It's a medical specialty about not specializing," says Dr. Art Ortenburger, associate professor of large animal surgery and integrative medicine at the Atlantic Veterinary College in Prince Edward Island.

"Board specialties don't come around overnight. These are serious, long-term and planned. Given another 30 to 40 years, we'll have that for veterinary medicine," he says, chuckling, recognizing that it sounds like an eternity.

The biggest roadblock? As noted Colorado State University associate professor and certified equine chiropractor and acupuncturist Dr. Kevin Haussler states on the American Association of Equine Practitioners website,

"limited research is available on equine chiropractic and other non-traditional methods in the industry."

Ortenburger, who is also certified in equine acupuncture and chiropractic, says, "It's extremely difficult to do well-designed, evidence-based research that's publishable in the scientific literature because the required statistical methods don't permit individualized treatment, and it isn't possible to 'blind' the animals or owners to the treatment.

"This kind of research is enormously expensive now, and there's no commercial incentive or profit potential for such research," he says. "The medical industry can't make serious money marketing a treatment that's done by one person with their bare hands right in the horse's stall."

But he adds, for those in the field, "The benefits of these treatments applied to appropriate cases are unmistakable."