Acupuncture in the Treatment of Back and Hindleg Pain in Sport Horses

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Lame sport horses and especially lame dressage horses present many diagnostic and therapeutic dilemmas. They are not often headnodding lame and may present with vague back and hindlimb complaints that defy traditional diagnostics (nerve blocks, radiology, and ultrasound). Acupuncture can be a valuable aid to diagnosis and treatment of many nontraditional complaints (such as lacks impulse, will not change leads, etc.) as well as an invaluable adjunct to conventional therapies. Author's address: Massachusetts Equine Clinic, 75 Locust St., Uxbridge, MA 01569. © 1997 AAEP.

1. Introduction

Dressage differs from other equine disciplines in its emphasis on slow, collected, and balanced work at low speed. The horses don't slide, spin, or sweat! They get better with age, peaking in their midteens in many cases. There are few juvenile competitions or futurities. Yet the higher the level of the performance, the less well conditioned the horses are. They are rarely turned out, do little cross training, and spend inordinate amounts of time doing repetitive movements. The same is true of many Morgan horses and other equitation horses. The result is that there is much more myopathy, desmitis, and back and shoulder pain than seems appropriate for animals so well cared for. Many of these animals work with chronic, low-grade pain.

2. Materials and Methods

The diagnostic workup, whether presented for lameness or nonperformance, traditionally began with careful observation, physical examination, palpation, flexion, and appropriate diagnostic tests selected on a progressive basis. A thorough examination by palpation of association points was included. Acupuncture formulas were developed based on palpation and examination. Most patients were treated with a combination of points recommended by Martin and Klide in 1987 (T2, T4, TLR, T10 and HL10), as well as others deemed appropriate to each case.1,2 In patients exhibiting patellar instability, the quadriceps group were injected in six points, each with 1 cm³ of 2% iodine in a peanut oil solution. These points include insertions of the middle and middle patellar ligaments as well as the proximal head of each part of the quadriceps. The appropriate points were treated by aquapuncture, i.e., the injection of a sterile liquid into the point to stimulate it. Sterile saline and vitamin B₁₂ were the most commonly used liquids. The treatments were repeated on an as-needed basis, with response determined by the owner or trainer. Case selection was based on examination and elimination of conditions that would respond more readily to conventional therapies. Patients with multiple problems also received appropriate traditional western medicine (TWM) therapy at the same time. Issues of conditioning, cross training,
equipment fit, and shoeing were also discussed. Acupuncture for the relief of back pain was first accepted by the American Veterinary Medical Association in 1987.1,2 Since then, its use in clinical practice has been widely accepted, especially for the relief of chronic back pain. The realization that back pain may exist as a primary entity is no longer in dispute; how to treat it successfully, however, still is in dispute and is the reason for this paper.

3. Results
According to our computer in 1996, there were 371 acupuncture treatments administered to 200 horses alone or in combination with various conventional therapies. Of these patients, 146/200 (73%) horses had primary back pain problems or back problems combined with other hindend problems, and 54/200 (27%) horses were treated with complaints that were not related to the back.

Of the horses that received treatment for primary back soreness, 84/146 (58%) horses received acupuncture treatment alone; the remaining 62/146 (42%) horses received acupuncture along with conventional methods or TWM. The TWM used in conjunction with acupuncture included joint injections, a variety of medications, shoeing changes, intrale- sional injections, and a discussion of management.

All horses that received acupuncture for the back or the back and hindend problems had previously been treated with some type of TWM, but with a low to medium response. Because the response to TWM was incomplete, acupuncture alone or in combination with the same or additional TWM and therapy was the chosen treatment for more response. Success was informally determined by owner or trainer evaluation.

Retreatments were done when (a) there was a significant but incomplete response, or (b) a predeter- mined assessment of need for follow-up had been made. Patients received between one and six treatments.

4. Discussion
Incorporation of acupuncture into our practice has been a decided benefit for patients and practice alike. It has expanded our diagnostic and therapeutic options and allowed treatments of horses that might have been lost to some of the nonprofessional therapists that abound. In our four-doctor practice, two members have received formal training and have been performing the modality for 15 and 12 years, respectively.

5. Conclusions
Clearly, acupuncture represents a significant portion of our therapies and is something without which the successful treatment of many such problems would be limited. Incorporation into a TWM-based practice is easy and cost effective if proper training is undertaken and proper perspective is retained. Horses undergo TWM diagnosis and treatment plans as the primary means of treatment. Acupuncture is offered only after the completion of a thorough workup. Because there are few specific TWM treatments for primary back pain, acupuncture is offered first for most of those cases.

References