

**Alternative Medicine for Horses**  
**ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE**

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**ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE FOR HORSES**  
**- A HOLISTIC JOURNEY**

It is a pleasure to write about a way of life, which has taken over my career and will see me on a steep learning curve, as it has for the last twenty-five years of practice (in 1997 at the time of writing), for the rest of my days. Horses are wonderfully sensitive and sentient beings and working with them has been a source of never-ending delight and discovery.

How sad, then, that they should so often be treated as working tools and as dispensable commodities. Happily, in contrast to this, most of those with horses who consult our clinic are those who care deeply for their equine companions and who work to fulfil all the obligations and responsibilities that 'ownership' brings. The result is not only that a great many horses are brought to our place (or I visit them) with so-called 'incurable' or 'intractable' illnesses, which an holistic approach and alternative medicine appear to be able to help significantly or even cure, but also that I meet a large number of very caring and perceptive people. These are people who are able to see things from their horse companion's point of view and come from all equine fields of endeavour with their charges, including racing, dressage, eventing, trotting, driving, hacking, hunting and even 'pet' horses.

Because horses are so sensitive, they are a wonderfully 'fertile ground' upon which to 'sow' natural medicine. The subtle, gentle stimulus provided by [homeopathy](#), [acupuncture](#), [herbs](#), [bach flowers](#), [tissue salts](#), [chiropractic](#), [LASER](#) etc. are all rapidly taken on board by the horse which, on accepting this stimulus, will commence a healing process in a great many chronic conditions for which conventional science offers little or no hope. Even such acute, sudden and potentially serious conditions as laminitis, colic, asthma\broken wind\heaves, bacterial infections or injuries can usually be handled competently with those safe and effective therapies and, as a bonus, without the tissue residue worries brought by conventional drugs (now that the EC has classified horses in the UK as 'food animals'). However, an exception to this point could be non-indigenous herbal

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medicine e.g. Devil's Claw, Chinese Herbs and Herbs from India or other continents, which a horse would be unlikely to meet while grazing on traditional UK pastures and which will give rise to tissue residues.

It is worth taking a closer look at the background of some of the natural therapies, to examine how they are used and how they may be helpful but first it is important to stress the holistic nature of the work. [Diet](#) is of immense importance and for this we usually choose natural 'straight' materials (organic if possible, especially the hay but, if it is not possible overall, we do insist on carrots being organic, since they can be a source of serious and significant toxins if not). The food our horses eat serves two main functions; firstly to drive the daily metabolic and physiological processes and pathways and secondly to provide the raw material for the constant tissue renewal that is taking place. Clearly, if the raw materials are less than optimal quality, so too will be the new tissues with which the horse repairs and recycles its body. Furthermore, if the ingredients of a diet (or supplements) are not suitable for the herbivore the horse has evolved to become (e.g. genetically engineered 'super yeasts', colouring, chemical antioxidants, shark products, fish oils, animal products - yes, gelatin, beef peptones, rendered bovine cartilage, liver extract and other animal ingredients can be found in some famous supplements and in patent arthritis treatments) then metabolism and physiological function can go astray, leading to possible problems, some of which are as yet unforeseen. The BSE story gives us horrible insight into the lack of wisdom, philosophical unsoundness and unbridled commerciality of these activities. Do read the labels critically. Unprocessed, non-cereal diets consisting of grass, other herbage and dried forage products from those, without adulteration with molasses etc., may be the optimal route but may not alone provide sufficient energy for working horses in our climate. Usually, in the UK, we need to feed some cereals in addition, e.g. straight oats, boiled linseed, bran, to provide the necessary extra energy for extreme competition work (properly balanced for minerals) but these should not be contaminated with molasses and other unsuitable materials. There is a single supplier of feeds (that we have found) who is taking all this concept on board.

Other holistic considerations are [saddling](#) and **harness** (both very important and sadly so often badly constructed and inappropriately fitted for the horse in question and the reason for a great deal of chronic locomotor disease in the horses I see), [shoeing](#) (it is vital that feet are properly balanced both fore and aft and side to side), **teeth**, [backs](#), **stabling**, **working** and [riding](#). All of these impinge daily upon your horse's structure and function and it is imperative, for long-term good health, structural soundness and longevity, that maximum attention is paid to them. These factors are of *fundamental* importance to the correct application of holistic medicine for your horse, and apply whether one is using homeopathy, acupuncture, herbs or any other form of therapy. Just giving medicine is not the

way to restore health rapidly and permanently but attention to detail, along with correctly chosen medicine, is.

## **Equine Homeopathy**

Back in the latter part of the eighteenth century, Hahnemann, a German physician, discovered the principle of homeopathy. He at first experimented upon himself and later upon other healthy human volunteers (no animal experiments of questionable morality and ethics for this man!) to hammer out the mechanism of 'like cures like'. It is a long and fascinating story of impeccable scientific enquiry and meticulous attention to detail but to relate it all would be to take up too many pages. For those with an interest in medical history, it makes enthralling reading. To cut a long story short, we are able to say that he discovered that the mechanism of action of *cinchona bark* (the source of *quinine*) against malaria was according to the principle of 'let like be cured by like' or '*similia similibus curentur*'. What symptoms a substance can cause in a healthy body, it is able to cure in a disease which gives rise to similar symptoms. He also devised a rigorous and painstaking method of serial dilution to render his medicines extremely safe and powerful. This is the process described as 'potentisation' and is the main factor for the blinkered incredulity with which so many conventionally-trained physicians and veterinarians, then and now, regard homeopathy. The extreme dilutions, removing the potentially toxic substance and harnessing the essential energy of a substance, has baffled medical scientists for years. However, the scientists whose real field of expertise it is, molecular physicists, have less of a problem with it (I know this, because I have talked with them, in some detail). One only has to witness the results of the stimulus, which is of an 'energetic' nature, upon the diseased organism to believe in the ability of homeopathy to stimulate the vastly underestimated healing powers of the body (provided adverse outside influences are neutralised as detailed in the preceding paragraph).

Conditions of the horse which are given a grave prognosis conventionally, such as chronic laminitis, 'broken wind' (or COPD), degenerative joint disease, sesamoiditis, navicular disease, sweet itch, chronic mud fever, arthritis, periodic ophthalmia (more commonly known as 'moonblindness' or 'equine recurrent uveitis' - for this we also rely heavily upon acupuncture techniques in addition to homeopathy), sarcoids, inveterate digestive disturbances, skin diseases and so on, all can respond remarkably well to veterinary homeopathy. Vet homeopathy is also extremely valuable for acute problems such as acute laminitis, spasmodic colic and injuries of all types including those to the limbs and eyes which are usually of especial concern to owners.

A short list of [first-aid](#) internal remedies for the stable to stock and use is:

**Arnica:** any bruising or injury - also very valuable to help prevent infection in wounds.

**Hypericum:** damage to nerve endings, major nerve trunks or terminal parts of the body e.g. tail, feet etc.

**Hepar sulph.:** helps to prevent infection in wounds or to treat infected wounds.

**Ruta:** helps the healing of fibrous tissues such as tendons, ligaments and fascia.

**Symphytum:** aids bone healing; its old family name was 'knitbone'.

Also very useful to add to a first aid kit is *Calendula* lotion for bathing wounds. It promotes healing and is very antiseptic in action.

While these remedies are very valuable for emergencies, it is often this simplicity of application in first-aid circumstances which leads people to forget that veterinary homeopathy is serious medicine for serious conditions, not just a first-aid measure in non-serious disease.

**N.B.** homeopathy is not to be confused with herbalism (see below). Although homeopathy uses many plants as source materials, it is used in a different way and uses other materials of mineral or animal origin too, selected for the patient according to the law of similars.

### **Equine Acupuncture**

The oldest medical text known to man is the *Huang-ti-Nei-jing-Su-wen*. This is of considerable age, estimated over two thousand years old. In it, the Yellow Emperor asks his physician wise and penetrating questions about health, life style, diet, disease and medicine and his physician answers these questions equally sagely, thus unravelling for us the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Acupuncture is only a part of that system and, in the West, we tend to use that part alone to the exclusion of its other very important parts, to its detriment and to the detriment of our clinical results.

Chinese Medicine proposes an energy flow. The life force or life energy being known as Chi (usually written Qi), circulates around the body in a series of channels or meridians. This cycle of energy lasts twenty-four hours, an amazing precursor of the now scientifically accepted 'circadian rhythm'. If this energy flow is disturbed or disrupted, there will be disease. Furthermore, if the quality of the energy is disturbed, expressed in terms of proportions of *Yin* and *Yang*, the eternal opposites, then that too will cause disharmony and disease. Acupuncture is **part of** the Chinese method of restoring a correct balance and flow of energy and, for this purpose, we select certain points along the meridians according to the perceived disturbance, and insert needles therein. The Chinese were very careful (and wise) to support this with internal medicine (usually herbs) and with diet and life style adjustments. This was a truly holistic practice and we do well to remember this, rather than just putting needles in horses and expecting that basic process to do all the work. I often integrate indigenous herbs or homeopathy with acupuncture in a

similar way and pay rigorous attention to factors outside the body which can contribute to or prevent recovery from disease.

Conditions of the horse which respond well to veterinary acupuncture are back problems [with the support of proper chiropractic work, proper saddle fitting (obvious) and proper shoeing (less obvious) - the gait can upset the back, just as the back can upset the gait]; arthritis and other leg problems; colic; digestive disturbances and many others. Acupuncture is a system of medicine still used by the majority of the human world, as a first line medicine, so is not to be dismissed as just a treatment for back pains. However, pain relief is one of its great strong points and it can be used even as a substitute for general anaesthesia in the case of surgery. The same applies to veterinary acupuncture.

### **Equine Herbs**

Since the dawn of human kind, herbal medicine has been with us. In fact, we even hear stories, not easily dismissed, of animals selecting their own herbs as medicine (pharmacognosy) when ill, provided enough choice is on offer (e.g. in wild prairie situations). For our horses, we should remember that herbs are a very natural way for them to take medicines, since they are herbivorous animals and should derive all their food and nutrients through herbage. The fact that they will also dig holes and eat soil suggests that they will seek natural supplementation with minerals too.

Plant constituents can be very powerful medically and this is often overlooked. It is also not widely realised that a great deal of the modern chemical drug armoury has been derived from herbs in the first place! However, extracting supposed active ingredients from their holistic context is not recommended, as occurs in some modern herbal practice, nor is the synthesis of chemical analogues as is done in conventional drug medicine, both of which will seriously distort the original holistic mode of action of the plant, used in its proper context. The pursuit of lucrative gains outweighs common sense and responsibility.

As far as the author is concerned several points of issue are worth raising. Indigenous herbs should generally be chosen for our horses in preference to exotic varieties, since it is with these that our domestic species have evolved. For this reason the author is reluctant to use Chinese herbs, Indian herbs (Ayurvedic), African herbs etc. in preference to Western herbs. *Devil's claw* is commonly used in latter times and is not an indigenous herb. Its prodigious harvesting is now endangering its very existence in the wild. The UK and continental Europe provide plentiful sources of herb medicine without having to resort to such exotic plants.

Some well-known herbs for common ailments are:

*Comfrey* - useful for bone injuries.

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- Milk Thistle* - helpful for liver disorders.
- Marigold* - helps wound healing and disinfection.
- Meadowsweet* - has painkilling and anti-inflammatory properties and is useful in case of injury in general.
- Dandelion* - promotes urine flow and helps to detoxify the body thereby.
- Nettles and Seaweed* - are both very good nutrient herbs.
- Garlic* - has an anti-worm reputation and is a valuable blood disinfectant and immune stimulant.

### **Other forms of natural medicine**

The foregoing three major forms of natural medicine will cover most eventualities but the others mentioned earlier do have very valuable contributions to make in certain cases. However, the length of this article forbids a detailed look at those.

### **Conclusion**

Natural medicine has enjoyed a massive amount of interest in modern times, not least on account of reluctance, on the part of many, to introduce potentially harmful chemicals into their horses' systems. This has resulted in demand far outstripping professional supply (vet acupuncturists, vet homeopaths etc.), so a multitude of illegal or quasi-legal, unqualified and often commercially-driven interests has arisen, besetting the bewildered horse owner with an excess of choice in enticing advertisements and websites. The caring owner will want to do the best possible for the horse in his or her charge and will willingly seek out medicines which may be of benefit to ease suffering. This can lead to serious traps and pitfalls. Please remember that, in general, only vets (other than yourself) are legally allowed to treat your horses and that only vets have a proper indemnity insurance to cover them for all eventualities. Qualified McTimoney animal chiropractors and qualified physiotherapists are also legal, if they operate via a vet. Other than that, *caveat emptor*. Herbal suppliers are pushing their wares with unsupported and actual or implied medical claims in their advertising or on the product labels; spurious back people abound and are doing damage (check the qualifications carefully); animal and beef ingredients such as gelatin, beef peptones or shark cartilage appear in keenly promoted supplements; other products with 'natural' tags, which are not really natural, are readily available and the inducements to buy are strong. Even supplements which should be simple, e.g. *garlic*, often contain only minimum amounts of the desired ingredient and are made up with a majority of a 'filler' (usually some form of cereal!). All that I can say is that it is the responsibility of the owner to sift and sort through all this maze and to select an ethical, philosophically-sound and legal route to follow, for the benefits of the horse in his or her care. I advise avoiding manufactured feed,

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avoiding most supplements unless they contain only the pure ingredient you are seeking, (which is rare), avoid posted medicines for your horse (whether homeopathy or herbal) since no proper prescription can be drawn up without personal knowledge of your horse and of extrinsic management factors, avoid medicines supplied illegally by non-vets and avoid unqualified back practitioners.

Natural medicine is a wonderful world of discovery and of seemingly miraculous results. It is hoped that the reader will find good results from its legal and ethical use and that horses hitherto considered to be nearing the end of their useful days can live on and regain their former health.

*Article first written in 1997 by Christopher Day – vet homeopath, vet acupuncturist, vet herbalist and vet chiropractor.*

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