



Ratley Lodge, Ratley, Banbury, Oxfordshire, OX15 6DT
tel: 01295 670501 fax: 01295 670778 www.avonvaleequine.co.uk

Osteopathy

Osteopathy is a branch of complementary medicine involving gentle manipulation to promote healing in damaged and stiff muscles and joints. It can be used for treating acute injuries but we find it most useful in the treatment of horses which are not moving normally, but show no frank lameness and no changes are seen on x-ray or scintigraphy. In many of these cases the rider is aware that things are not right, but friends and trainers often blame the rider!

The vague nature of these conditions, which may show only as hanging one way, stiffness, striking off on the wrong leg, or inability to flex the back or neck fully, makes performance difficult to measure. Dressage is one discipline where performance is independently assessed and our dressage patients are typically scoring five to ten marks less than they have previously been achieving. We find that thermography is the one diagnostic aid that is useful in such cases and can also be used to assess the response to treatment. It has not been widely used in veterinary medicine however, and we have had to pioneer its use in this country over the last 18 years, in conjunction with vets in the USA, and consultants in human medicine.

The type of condition we are dealing with can be likened to a computer software problem. All the hardware is present and functional, but there is a communication problem between the various parts. The software equivalent in the horse is the central nervous system and most probably the sympathetic nervous system. This is the system which is responsible for all the bodily functions that happen without any conscious thought, such as breathing, heart rate, muscle tone and control of blood flow. It is probable that some past injury has caused changes in the output of the nerve system as a protective mechanism. Bruising to the tissues resolves but the nervous supply remains dysfunctional and sometimes worsens with time. It is the osteopath's job to reprogram the nervous pathways.

Selecting patients for osteopathic treatment

Each horse is given a thorough clinical examination, and a thermographic assessment. In many cases, especially if no lameness is present this is sufficient, combined with the clinical history, for a diagnosis of spinal dysfunction (or sympathetic dystonia) to be made. In most cases we will carry out radiography of the neck and back to make sure there is no obvious underlying bone disease. In some older horses, horses showing bony asymmetry, or horses showing clinical signs associated with arthritic changes, we may recommend scintigraphy (bone scanning). In lame horses it may be necessary to carry out a full lameness work up in order to eliminate other problems before addressing the back. This is to make sure there is no underlying injury to bones or joints which may be more amenable to treatment by other methods. In many horses however the use of these more involved examinations is not necessary or justifiable.

Treatment

If we have concluded that your horse has a back problem, then we may suggest physiotherapy or chiropractic treatments for many recent injuries. In a few cases we may recommend surgery for example for overriding dorsal spinous processes, and in some cases with chronic low grade problems we may recommend osteopathy as the most likely treatment to return your horse to normality. If we undertake osteopathic treatment at Ratley, then treatment follows a well established routine:-

1/. First the osteopath (Tony Nevin) will make his own independent assessment of your horse. Then the vet and osteopath will discuss the case, and agree a suitable line of treatment. We will either progress on to treatment, or if there are any doubts about the case we may recommend further investigations, either straight away, or after osteopathic treatment has started.

2/. We will administer a light sedative. This enables the horse to dissociate conscious responses from the manipulative treatment that takes place. It does not however mean that the horse can not respond if frightened, and it is important to be aware that we suffer more injuries from sedated horses than from fully conscious patients!

3/. Treatment is initiated and controlled by the osteopath, although a vet and equine veterinary nurse are usually present and assist through out. Treatment is gentle and often appears to affect areas of musculature remote from where manipulation is taking place. In general terms we use trigger points and reflexes to allow the horse to flex joints, and stretch muscle groups that have been held in tension by the protective mechanisms of the central nervous system, often long after the initiating causes are past. We put the horse into a position where it can treat itself, and do not in any way impose our wishes on the system. The result is most horses actively enjoy treatment, but they also dictate how much we can achieve at any one session.

4/ After treatment is finished the horse usually requires about 30 minutes recovery time in a stable, for the sedative to wear off, before they are ready to travel home. During this period it is usual for them to show patchy sweating, and also to stale.

Treatment is usually slow, and lacks any drama! Response is also slow, so do not expect anything very obvious straight away. Usually the first comments we get are that the horse is better tempered!

It is very difficult for us to predict how many treatments will be required. We have now treated in excess of 3500 horses this way, and on average they require 6-8 treatments before returning to work, and may need two or three follow up treatments during the first months of return to work. A significant number of cases require one treatment under general anaesthesia during the initial treatment phase. This is only carried out if necessary and this can only be determined as we progress through treatment. It does however allow us to treat areas of the spine that can not be manipulated in the standing horse, and also can help release joints which are sore, because the horse has held them rigid for very long periods of time.

Between treatments, the horse should not be ridden or exercised in any way. It can be turned out, and we would like it to move around under its own volition, but not perform hand stands or cart wheels! We leave it to the owners to decide how this is best achieved for any particular patient, but are always pleased to discuss it with you.

At the end of the course of treatment we will discuss how the horse should be returned to work. This usually involves plenty of walking in hand (or long reigning) initially, before it can be ridden. This is a vital part of treatment, and if you are unable or unwilling to carry this out, or if the horse can not be fully rested during the course of treatment, it is better to reconsider if this is the best treatment option for your circumstances before getting involved with the osteopathy.

Assessment of our cases over the years shows that 80% of them have returned to their previous level of work or better after treatment. This of course means that 1 in 5 fails to make a full recovery, although most will be able to work at a lower level.