

Hoof Trimming in Horses

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SIR, - The horse's foot is an evolutionary feat. Man tampers with it at the horse's peril. To function properly and remain healthy, the foot requires constant mobilization, expansion and contraction.

William the Conqueror (1066) can be blamed for introducing the 'stall-and-shoe' system of horse management to Britain. He later suffered rough justice when his horse stumbled, fell and rolled on him. He died from being pummeled by his pommel but the root cause of the accident was not recognized. So the practice of imprisoning horses and ironing their feet went unquestioned for the next eight centuries until Bracy Clark (1809), one of the first veterinarians to graduate from the Royal Veterinary College, started to publish his iconography on hoofcare.

Clark referred to the hoof as *"this beautiful organ"* and lamented *"its destruction by common shoeing."* He described how he first became aware of the healthy (unshod) hoof's ability to expand when bearing weight. *"It was not till after many disappointments in turning horses out to grass to recover feet, without success, that I began to apprehend that it was the too solid resistance of the shoe and nails to an organ endowed with a high degree of natural elasticity, that produced these effects."* To prove that shoeing prevented necessary expansion *"an experiment was necessary of a very tedious description, that of following the same foot with plaster casts for several years, and comparing them. And the evidence obtained was, a constant annual diminution and hardening of the foot, from the too rigid embrace of its protector."* He noted that the foot became progressively narrow with each passing year until it became *"stunned, benumbed, and contracted."* Feet were *"reduced by ironing to two thirds their natural dimension! And hardened with bone where no bone should exist."* He recognized that this serious *"diminishment of volume"* was so common that a deformed hoof was mistaken by the teachers of the day for a healthy hoof. Clark noted that shoeing was first introduced in the Dark Ages and that *"the slow mischief of its effects"* passed unnoticed *"bringing to the horse more sufferings than all his other cruelties and wrongs put together."*

For his heretical opinions, Clark was reviled and ridiculed by his colleagues and his findings suppressed. A couple more centuries passed before a veterinarian in Germany came independently to the same conclusions (Strasser 1998). Strasser has shown that, when properly managed, horses are happier, healthier and better athletes without iron clamps on their feet. Sadly, her research, though enthusiastically studied and successfully put into practice by thousands of horse owners, worldwide, has met with a similar blend of hostility and misrepresentation from the veterinary profession as that served out to Bracy Clark.

Yet not one iron-foot veterinarian has published scientific arguments to refute the barefoot hypothesis. The iron-based podiatry literature simply ignores the new research. Citations to the publications of barefoot pioneers like Strasser and Jackson (1997) are noticeable by their absence. But science is dependent on dialogue and advances by a process of constant correction. If members of the iron-based school disagree with barefoot management, in whole or in part, it is incumbent on them to publish their reasons. Countless thousands of barefoot 'natural experiments' around the world have demonstrated that immobilizing a horse and nailing iron rings on its feet is harmful. Veterinarians who continue to support farriery (etymologically, the use of iron for hoofcare) are no longer in compliance with the Hippocratic oath.

By dismissing barefoot management, the profession is repeating the mistake it made two hundred years ago. First, it is once again missing an opportunity to make a fundamental contribution to equine welfare. Secondly, it is in danger of being regarded, by educated horse owners, as incompetent & useless on the topic of hoof care and a barrier to reform. Thirdly, veterinary students are being misinformed and misled. The general public, welfare societies and judges are equally unenlightened, precipitating some recent miscarriages of justice.

As an observer of this sad situation, I have tried to alert equine veterinarians to the merits of barefoot management (Cook 2001 a & b, 2002, 2003 a & b, 2004, Cook et al 2006). A few practicing veterinarians have published their findings in support (e.g., Teskey, 2005, 2006 a & b, and Roberts 2005). But the numbers of veterinarians who are willing to stand up and be counted on this important issue are still small. I was, therefore, delighted to read the letter from Deborah Collings, in which she expresses her *"disappointment that there seems to be so little interest or understanding of the barefoot method of trimming in the veterinary and farriery professions* (VR, November 11, 2006, vol159, p688). I join her in this appeal on behalf of the truth about the hoof.

An imprisoned horse with steel fetters nailed to the skin of its feet is a doomed horse.

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