

TO TREAT OR NOT TO TREAT – THAT IS THE QUESTION!

Last month we wrote a feature on preventing or minimising musculo-skeletal problems in horses by recognising the early warning signs and taking prompt action accordingly. This month we want to follow this up by adding a brief discussion on deciding whether to ‘treat’ a problem that may have been identified.

Often horse owners are in a situation where their horse has a suspected problem and they are unsure how serious it may be and therefore whether treatment is needed or not. If, for example, a horse has a wound then certain factors should be considered before deciding whether to call the vet or not. In some cases calling the vet is routinely advised such as with arterial bleeding or colic, but what about less obvious and non life threatening problems such as presumed back pain or poor performance?

This is where we feel some clarification is needed regarding the difference between seeking a professional opinion for a problem versus having the problem ‘treated’. The key to less obvious problems is usually deciding *what* the primary or underlying problem actually is, how serious it is and what type of intervention or treatment is most suitable. For example, a minor but un-resolving lameness is best seen initially by the vet to determine where and what the cause of the problem is and hence what would be the best course of action or treatment.

Then there is the difficulty of deciding if and what additional treatments may help different types of identified conditions. The problem is choosing from such a wide array of treatments available with many medical, alternative and complimentary therapies on offer. Just some examples are Osteopathy, Chiropractic, Aromatherapy, Herbal medicines, Bowen, Veterinary medicine, Acupuncture and Physiotherapy. The list is endless. Then there is of course always the option of resting your horse for various times to see if it helps. No wonder people are confused about what to do! As a starting point, I would suggest that owners discuss the various options with their vet who should be able to give guidance on the most suitable and safest way forwards.

Most complimentary or alternative therapies will have governing bodies that should be able to tell you about the rules governing their members such as length of training, qualifications, ongoing training, professional conduct and insurance. In any case you need to be aware that anyone who ‘treats’ your horse must do so with the authorisation of your vet otherwise they are acting illegally according to the Veterinary Act (1966) and therefore will not be insured if something goes wrong. Qualified and registered physiotherapists are members of, and governed by, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in London and will use the letters MCSP. If they are also trained to treat animals they will be registered with the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy and have the letters ACPAT(A).

You may think as an owner that if no manipulation or specific electrotherapy treatment is carried out that your physiotherapist hasn’t actually *treated* your horse or that no actual *physiotherapy* was carried out. This shows that sometimes there is a lack of owner understanding as to what physiotherapy actually is. Hopefully we will shed some light on this matter to help owners in making informed decisions regarding the treatment (or not!) of their animals.

Physiotherapists obviously practice physiotherapy but this in itself is not just a 'type of treatment' for example a particular type of massage, application of an electrotherapy machine or a manipulation. It is a wide range of skills, amongst which detailed clinical assessment and evaluation and the giving of correct advice is probably the most important. Consider laser, therapeutic ultrasound or electrical muscle stimulation treatments (all types of electrotherapy) which are relatively straight forward to administer. Because they are not difficult to use (after appropriate instruction) they could potentially be carried out by most capable owners. In fact some electrotherapy equipment and some other more obscure treatment modalities can be purchased via the internet these days and used by anyone, which is a little worrying, so be careful who you allow to treat your horse! The skilled part of any treatment is the training and knowledge needed to decide what specific type of treatment, what dosages to apply, how often to treat, where to treat, treating the correct tissue type according to the current state of the damaged tissues and most importantly when *not* to treat. This is the professional opinion that should be sought rather than the type of actual 'treatment' itself. The keystone to physiotherapy is the assessment process, without which all treatments would be applied in a random fashion on a trial and error basis with, at best, a short term but often unsustainable improvement.

Should this article have raised any concerns or questions in your mind regarding either yourself and/or your horse or Veterinary Physiotherapy in general , please feel free to call (01634 671651) or email us (admin@bluebellphysio.co.uk).