

## PREVENTION OF HORSE-RELATED ACCIDENTS

From: Robert Cook

To: Debbie Stanitski, MD, President of Equestrian Medical Safety Association

Date: July 11, 2014

Dear Dr. Stanitski,

Thank you for your note. My telephone number is listed below and I look forward to your call sometime next week. I live on the Eastern Shore of Maryland (EST).

Courtney King Dye's courageous video on the new EMSA website was heart-breaking to watch. As you know, her accident occurred because her horse tripped. You may not know that tripping is just one of many problems caused by the bit. In a survey I have recently submitted for publication, 17 out of 56 horses were reported by their owners to trip when ridden in a bitted bridle. When the same horses were transitioned to a bitless bridle, only 6 continued to trip. In this particular sample, not less than 65% of tripping horses did so because of the bit. A copy of the manuscript and its accompanying Table I is attached (see 'Measurement of bit-pain in the ridden horse').

But the bit problem does not end there. Comparable 'not less than' percentages for other bit-induced problems include but are not limited to bucking (84), bolting (96), rearing (70), balking (81), spooking (93), difficult to steer (81), head tossing (66) and pulling (88). There is an almost endless number of other behavioral responses to pain. For a listing of 86 items (ending in personal injury [80]) see Table I from the above manuscript.

Bits hurt horses and frighten them. With a bit in their mouth, many a horse is apprehensive; nervous; 'highly strung'; on tenterhooks; thinking about present pain or fearful of pain to come. As the saying goes, "to a frightened man, everything rustles." The same applies to the horse. Such horses are often mistakenly assumed to be 'difficult,' 'bad characters' and even 'dangerous to ride,' when the real fault lies in their equipment. Riders who have switched to a bitless bridle are often delighted to discover that the 'character' of their horses changes dramatically for the better. Negative traits that they thought were 'hard-wired' into their horse's genetics were found to be due to nurture not nature. People who may have worried that they had "too much horse" or a horse that they "could not handle," find that - in fact - they have a much better horse than they ever imagined. Their horse calms down, becomes compliant, is able to learn, and performs better.

As a result of recognizing these advantages, a deeply committed group of bitless pioneers have succeeded, over the last 15 years, in launching a worldwide bitless movement that is gathering grass-roots momentum with every passing year.

It will help if, prior to our chat, you scan through some of the attached peer-reviewed articles I have published in the last 15 years. Emphatically, I am not asking EMSA to

endorse my particular bridle. Thanks to the 'flattery' of emulation there are now many different versions of the crossunder (a generic term) on the market, worldwide. In addition, there is an abundance of both traditional sidepulls and hackamores and more modern versions of these same basic designs, all of which fall under the wider generic 'bitless bridle.' Just as with the bit, there are a confusing number of bitless choices. It is worth mentioning that the Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation chose to approve ALL bitless bridles in their recent dressage rule update.

The rein-aid, being such a fundamental tool of equitation, it is important to recognize in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a metal-tipped rein that invades a sensitive body cavity is contra-indicated in terms of safety, incompatible with exercise physiology, inconsistent with learning theory and unacceptable, in many countries, both legally and ethically.

My hope is that EMSA will simply add the topic of bit-induced accidents to their accident prevention agenda. I am not expecting EMSA to support a ban-the-bit campaign (fully-justified, scientifically, though this would be) but it would be a step in the right direction if EMSA at least opened the discussion on bitless riding and driving and perhaps the need for an update of rules to provide a safer, more humane method of rider/horse communication. I cannot provide prevalence statistics to support this but, as for competitions purposes, a bit is present in over 90% of cases and as, in recreational riding, a bit is present in over 95% of cases, it is likely that the bit is the most common cause of horse-related accidents. As this is a problem that recreational riders can solve overnight and sport horse administrations can solve with a stroke of the pen, it is a problem worth discussing.

In closing, let me say again how much I applaud the work EMSA has done and continues to do to encourage riders to wear helmets. That said, helmets reduce injuries in accidents but do not prevent the accidents themselves.

Respectfully,

Bob

PS: My 'fix-it' article is only published on my website but I am attaching it because it is of relevance to accident prevention.

PPS: To avoid swamping your computer, I will send the peer-reviewed articles by a separate post.