

Letter to the Editor, Thoroughbred Times, 16 January 1999

### **AN EXPLANATION FOR HEADSHAKING**

Dear Sir,

In her letter to the Veterinary Topics column (Thoroughbred Times, December 19, 1998) Lafreda Williams describes a pattern of abnormal behavioral signs at exercise that has been exhibited by her 11 year old Thoroughbred gelding, especially during the warmer months of the year. These include violent head tossing, striking with the front feet, and constant nose-blowing. The advice given was that the horse was malingering and should be put into the hands of a stern disciplinarian who will not tolerate this behavior.

The owner describes a syndrome that is typical of a well-recognized problem, generally referred to as headshaking. She has already gone to some trouble to find a solution to the problem but as yet has found none. This too is typical of the headshaking problem. I have written four articles for scientific journals on headshaking and in each one I made it clear that, though I could describe the problem only too easily, I had consistently failed to find the cause or the cure. But recent experience has taught me that a simple cure for at least some instances of this recalcitrant problem is available and I would like to suggest that this should be given a trial before resorting to "a stern disciplinarian".

Headshaking, along with a number of other problems such as roaring, dorsal displacement of the soft palate, and bleeding from the lung, can be caused by the bit. The mechanism for the headshaking may be a combination of facial neuralgia and shortage of oxygen. Constant pressure of the bit on the sensitive tissues of the mouth and the bone of the jaw may, I suspect, set up a trigeminal neuralgia (tic douloureux). This could account for the temperature sensitivity and other signs that are a feature of this syndrome. The owner could test this possibility by riding the horse in a bitless bridle that does not control through poll flexion. Avoidance of extreme poll flexion would also improve the horse's supply of oxygen during exercise, reduce the horse's feeling of frustration (another source of headshaking) and greatly increase its comfort.

If riding is fun for the rider but not for the horse we should ask ourselves what we are doing wrong, rather than opting for coercion. We are likely to obtain better cooperation and better performance if the horse is also happy. When a horse is headshaking, however, neither rider nor horse is happy.

Sincerely  
Robert Cook