FEAR OF THE BIT:
A welfare problem for horse and rider

W. Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD[1]

Part III: BEHAVIORAL PROFILING QUESTIONNAIRE

Some comments on the questionnaire

By completing the first column of the questionnaire in Table I at a time when a bit is in use, a rider can be alerted to the presence of bit-induced problems. Riders may not have previously suspected that many of the problems they were experiencing with their horse were even caused by the bit. The majority of the problems listed in the questionnaire (c.100) are most commonly caused by the bit. Over a quarter of the problems are exclusively caused by the bit. Nevertheless, there are many that are non-specific and could be attributed either to the bit or to pain from some other source (e.g. an incorrectly fitted saddle or the presence of shoes).

By completing the second column of the questionnaire after the bit has been removed, it is possible to generate a tally of those problems that are bit-induced (generally a surprisingly long list) and to highlight those remaining problems for which some alternative explanation needs to be sought. A good time to complete the second column would be after a month's usage. If it is completed within one or two weeks of adopting the whole-head-hug method, following years of bit use, some of the persisting problems may still be bit-induced but simply need a little more time to resolve. This applies, especially, to trigeminal neuralgia but the memory of fear may also take time to fade.

The questionnaire serves the rider as an aid to diagnosis and as a guide to treatment. It provides the rider with a means of differentiating, for example, between the most unlikely possibility of a behavioral problem being inherent to the character of the horse and the much greater probability that it is caused, albeit unintentionally, by the rider inflicting bit pain. Many horsemen have been surprised to discover that some trait in their horse that they presumed to be inborn and, therefore, a permanent character flaw was in fact amenable to correction by simply removing the bit. Horsemen who are under the impression that their horse does not hate the bit may change their mind after reading Table I.

A collection of these questionnaires serves as a database for future research. In addition, the author can use the first half of the questionnaire (the bitted behavior

[1] Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine. USA
Chairman, The Bitless Bidle Inc.
Current address: 206, Birch Run Road, Chestertown, MD 21620 USA
Tel: (410) 778 9005 E-mail: drcook@bitlessbridle.com

profile) as a basis for advising riders about problems they are experiencing with their horse.

The questionnaire is based on an article published earlier in the year (Cook 2003), where the problems that had been solved in 605 horses by removing the bit were listed in their descending order of frequency. That material has now been updated and rearranged for the purpose of forming a questionnaire.

In compiling the original table, the author learned two things worth emphasizing. Before studying the users' reports, he had not appreciated the **extent** to which a bit causes pain and **frightens** a horse. The most commonly reported adverse behavioral effects were classifiable under the four F's of fright, flight, fight and freeze. Similarly, it can be said that, although the bit method is responsible for causing not less than 100 problems for the horse, most of these are subsets of the first four. FEAR of pain is the paramount factor, as fear is the motivating factor behind all four F's. Quite apart from the compelling *animal* welfare argument, it can be said of bits in general from a *human* welfare point of view that it is not a good idea to use a method that causes pain and frightens an animal as large and powerful as a horse. A horseman's adage worth remembering is that *pain makes a horse pull.*

Results

Naturally, it is unlikely that any one horse will exhibit every problem. The equestrian discipline for which the horse is used will have a bearing on the likelihood of certain problems occurring. For example, dressage horses that are required to perform with a high degree of poll flexion (often and mistakenly brought about by rein pressure rather than by true collection) are most likely to develop the headshaking syndrome. Thoroughbred racehorses, all of which are required to work at their maximum athletic performance, are most likely to develop pulmonary bleeding. Standardbred racehorses that are required to race with two bits in their mouth (a snaffle bit and an overcheck bit) are most likely to develop dorsal displacement of the soft palate. All three of these problems can and do occur in other disciplines but their prevalence is less.

Using the questionnaire, a sample of 12 bitted horses were recognized as exhibiting from 11 to 36 problems, with an average of 23 problems per horse. But after using the whole-head-hug method for periods ranging from four days to six months (average 42 days), the degree to which these problems were solved ranged from 38% to 94% (average 67%). The top scoring horse was an 11-year-old Arab gelding trained for dressage. This horse had 33 problems, of which 31 (94%) were solved after six weeks.

When more than two thirds of a horse's problems can be eliminated in 42 days, simply by removing one or more steel rods from its oral cavity, it serves to emphasize the merit of the whole-head-hug method of communication.

Since the above figures were compiled, one user has completed questionnaires on each of four dressage horses that she has owned for many years. As it happened, each horse when bitted had the same number of problems (37). By removing the bit, all problems were cured with the exception of one problem in one horse that continued to foam at the mouth. Another user had a horse that exhibited 50 problems, 45 of which (90%) were solved by removing the bit.

Summary

From prehistoric times until quite recent years, the bit has been thought of as a method of **control**. But the bit has never worked like a steering wheel or a brake on a car. Use of the word 'control' has led to a serious misunderstanding in the history of equitation. A bit is not and never has been a mechanical device for controlling a horse at exercise. At best it is a signaling device for **communication**. It should not and cannot be used to 'control' in the sense of 'command.' It should only be used to signal a request, to 'suggest' an action. The more polite (i.e. painless) the request, the more likely it is that the horse will comply. Unfortunately, because all bits are foreign bodies inserted in a highly sensitive body cavity and used to apply highly focused pressure on bone, they are - by their very nature - painful. The only way that a bit can never cause pain is for it never to be used.

So if it is not to be used, why do we put it there? Such a non-use standard may be achievable by a few master horsemen riding with a slack rein and a Western curb. But even with them the bit still remains an intrusive foreign body that has no business to be in the mouth of an exercising horse. Even though it may not cause pain in the hands of a master it still interferes in other ways with the physiology of exercise (Cook 1999b). A grazing horse is fastidious about what it puts in its mouth. Left to its own devices it would certainly reject any item that faintly resembled a bit.

The author concludes that, as a method of communication, the bit is fundamentally flawed. Pain in the mouth causes horses to run (i.e. bolt) or protest by head tossing, bucking, rearing and many other evasive actions (Table I). Any method of communication that can only be used humanely by an experienced horseman after many years of practice, and that can only be used humanely on an intermittent basis by the average horseman, and that cannot be used at all humanely by a novice, is not a method that can be recommended. A method that cannot be used without inflicting pain, other than by a small minority of riders is, by definition, not suitable for general adoption.

Even If a reader disagrees with the above, there are other problems. Before learning the intricacies of 'correctly' fitting and using a bit, an owner has to face the minefield of 'finding' the right bit in the first instance. To discover the right

‘key to a horse’s mouth’ riders are expected to have an intimate knowledge of the anatomy of their horse’s mouth. Books on bitting warn that a rider should be able to judge such niceties as the width of their horse’s mouth, the depth of the tongue groove, the fleshiness of the tongue, the concavity of the hard palate, the conformation of the jaw and the status of the dentition. Even supposing a rider had mastered the technique of actually opening a horse’s mouth to make such appraisals, these are matters that remain a mystery to most equestrians.

Furthermore, if one chooses not to answer the thorny question as to whether it is even possible to *select and fit* a bit ‘correctly’ (it isn’t), one has only to read any book on bitting to be alerted to the degree of knowledge and skill that is required for the ‘correct’ *employment and maintenance* of such a device. The ‘tongue-over- the-bit’ problem is only one of many problems that a rider is expected to solve. An average rider that fails to solve this problem can take comfort in the fact that there are plenty of advanced riders in the same boat who are competing at Grand Prix level. As few horseman possess the qualifications for what used to be called the ‘making of a mouth,’ the bit method of communication cannot be recommended for the universal application that it has for so long enjoyed. The average rider can no more be expected to exercise the necessary discretion and skill for using one or more bits than a child can be expected to play safely with an open razor.

The correct selection and use of a hackamore or a bosal also has many pitfalls. Once again, experience and skill is required, together with a period of training of both horse and rider.

In happy contrast, one does not have to be either an anatomist or a master horseman to select and use the whole-head-hug method. Subtle variations in the conformation of the mouth and jaw are not of any consequence and even the normal eruption of permanent dentition is no longer a matter of concern. It is still wise to attend to sharp enamel edges on the molar teeth but wolf teeth, for example, no longer have to be removed and there is no need to create ‘bit seats.’ Unlike when using a bit or a hackamore, a rider cannot hurt a horse with a whole-head-hug. The method can be used for all horses, in all disciplines, and by all riders, even (and especially) novices. Horses that are not in pain are far less nervous. Being calm they are also in the right frame of mind to learn, so schooling proceeds faster and with fewer setbacks. A rider does not have to overcome, avoid or treat so many bit-induced problems or survive so many pain-triggered hazards. It is so easy for a rider to make mistakes using a bit.

The whole-head-hug method protects riders from making mistakes because, unlike the bit method, it is virtually impossible to make mistakes. As long as the bridle is fitted correctly (an easy task) there is really no way in which the whole-head-hug method can be used incorrectly and certainly no way in which the method can be abused. As a result, riders discover that they are better horsemen than they previously supposed and that they have a better horse than

they previously assumed. It encourages them to be less dependent on the reins and to communicate more with balance, breathing, seat and legs. Being bitless makes them better riders. Training advances more rapidly and a harmonious partnership is fostered between man and horse.

In choosing a method of communication, a rider has the option of hurting or hugging: being an enemy or a friend (predator or partner). The bit signals painfully with metal on bone and jeopardizes the safety and welfare of horse and rider. The hug signals painlessly with strap on head and enhances safety and welfare. To the horse it feels like a halter but to the rider it feels like a bridle. The author's recommendation can be summed up by reversing a familiar phrase … spare the rod and save the horse.

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