

IS IT TIME FOR HOOF-CARE REVOLUTION?

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Questions why many in the equine sector, vets included, have not acted on research into unshod horses – a principle, he says, that also applies generally to unused veterinary Knowledge

Part one: resistance to new ideas

“A lie can get halfway around the world before the truth can even get its boots on.”

It will soon be 150 years since the publication of ‘*The Origin of Species*,’ perhaps the most important book ever written. Despite the overwhelming evidence in support of the theory of evolution and the failure of all attempts to disprove it, acceptance of the truth of the theory by the general public is far from complete. Even in the UK, the birthplace of Darwin, one recent poll suggests less than half the population accepts evolution (25). If the truth about such a fundamental matter is not understood and, therefore, not accepted, it is no surprise that new knowledge about veterinary medicine fails to be applied. Part one of this article examines some of the reasons responsible for the delay in applying recent advances in hoof care for horses and part two suggests ways of overcoming the inertia. However, the principles discussed apply to unused veterinary knowledge in general.

A less memorable version of Mark Twain’s quote is: “*Truth travels slowly and falsehood moves fast.*” Bad news spreads like lightning, whereas good news has the velocity of a glacier. Why is this? Many will be aware that two Strasser hoof-care professionals have been prosecuted in the UK and found guilty of cruelty. I wonder how many veterinarians know that one of the defendants has lodged an appeal?

How was it that these prosecutions - of two people who, I believe, are deeply committed to improving equine welfare - were ever filed in the first instance? And, with what I consider to be terrible irony, how was it that they were filed by a welfare organization, the RSPCA, which I believe should have applauded and supported their commitment rather than taken them to court.

In my opinion, if the RSPCA and its advisors had understood the research published since the start of the millennium, they would have realized that shoeing was an indisputable act of cruelty (1-12; 14-17). It is my view that those who try to rehabilitate shod horses should be praised not persecuted.

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How can such disconnects arise? Perhaps, in the words of Julian Huxley, *“false thinking brings wrong conduct”*.

With regard to hoof care, blindness to the truth is more ingrained than Mark Twain’s example, in which truth and falsehood apparently jumped out of the starting gate together.

The truth on the hoof has to combat a medieval myth about shoeing that has had a thousand year start. As John Maynard Keynes wrote: *“The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping the old ones... which ramify into every corner of our minds like the clinging roots of an old juniper.”*

Juniper effect

Shoes are not protectors of the feet. They damage and deform the feet (Fig 1), harm and disable the whole horse (7).

	NORMAL	ABNORMAL
Lateral		
Dorso-ventral		



*Figure 1. Showing the normal anatomy of the pedal bone in the forelimb as judged by specimens collected from feral mustangs (column A), compared with some of the deformities of the pedal bone associated with shoeing (Column B).
1b. Erosion of the solar rim, ossification of the lateral cartilages, exostosis of the angle, dumping of the toe.
2b. Erosion of the solar rim, hair line fracture on left side of toe.
3b. Gross loss of the right quarter
4b. Loss of the normal concavity and arch of the sole surface in a pedal bone that has sunk.
5b. The dark object is a sequestrum removed during the rehabilitation of a 16 year-old horse. It is placed against a normal pedal bone to indicate the size of the specimen.*

Shoeing a horse appears to be disturbingly similar to the practice of footbinding a girl. Both practices:

- Were dreamed-up in the 10th century AD
- Have persisted for at least a thousand years.
- Were initiated by the elite and then widely emulated
- Victimized the very young (four-year-old girls and yearling Thoroughbreds)
- Caused and continue to cause immense suffering.
- Deform the foot, prevent its growth and interfere with its function
- Result, sooner or later, in an abnormal gait
- Are accompanied by near total 'house' arrest
- Prevent their victims from 'kicking off their shoes' at night
- Result in huge economic losses and shortened life spans
- Are, by definition, cruel – as the pain and suffering is unnecessary
- When discontinued, are followed by a major remodeling of bone and soft tissue. If the deformity is advanced, rehabilitation can be both painful and prolonged



Figure 6. Shoeing a horse appears to be 'disturbingly similar' to the practice of foot-binding a girl, according to Robert Cook.

Footbinding persisted for a thousand years and shoeing still flourishes in the 21st century, with an estimated 100,000 practitioners on the planet. The anti-footbinding movement commenced with the Taiping Rebellion of 1850 in which 30 million died. Footbinding was formally banned in 1911.² The anti-shoeing

² Sadly, the dictates of western fashion still condemn women to a modern version of footbinding. According to research, tight fitting shoes are the cause of bunions in 90% of afflicted patients.

movement has taken longer to get underway but the battle to reform has commenced. Some pioneers have already been hurt.

Absence of open debate

Thanks to two pioneers - a farrier in the USA, Jaime Jackson (1.8.9) and a veterinarian in Germany, Dr.Hiltrud Strasser (2-4) - I believe indisputable evidence disproving the claim that domesticated horses need shoes has been available for over a decade. We live in an information age and, as a result, many horse owners have been quick to recognize the validity of the evidence and have unshod their horses. Yet strangely, the information is not being adopted with the same enthusiasm by veterinarians and farriers as a group, nor welcomed and acted upon by welfare organizations and national federations. Surely, these are the very people that should be leading the reform?

Why are laymen setting an example by making use of the research, when, as judged by the scientific literature, veterinarians as a group have greeted the advance with a majestic silence and have shied away from even engaging in open debate on this topic?

Science advances by a process of falsification. Every scientific hypothesis is vulnerable to disproof. Significantly, in ten years, no one has even attempted to disprove the barefoot hypothesis. Quite apart from the many books on barefoot management now published by both Strasser and Jackson, why is it that a long and supportive article by Dr.Tomas Teskey (14) in a veterinary journal has also remained unchallenged? How did this article escape the notice of the advocates of shoeing? Dr.Teskey, who was a farrier before he became a veterinarian, wrote: *"Shod horses have historically represented what has been thought of as a 'higher level' of care in my area and throughout the equine industry, received 'better' nutrition, housing, and management than barefoot horses. However, in my practice, the incidence of limb diseases and injury is 70% higher among shod horses."*

No 'knights of the iron shoe' have appeared (in the scientific journals) to challenge the 'knights of the naked hoof.' Why is this? In the spirit of medieval times, I throw down a gauntlet. As nothing by way of refutation has been published in the last ten years, I claim that the knights-of-the-iron-shoe have - by their very silence - conceded defeat in the jousting tournament of science.



Figure 7. The author writes: *In the spirit of medieval times, I throw down a gauntlet. As nothing by way of refutation has been published in the last ten years, I claim that the 'knights of the iron shoe' have – by their very silence – conceded defeat in the jousting tournament of science.*

Fear of farriers

In April, 2008 a book was published that, among many other things, helps to explain the silence of veterinarians in practice - if not that of research clinicians in veterinary schools (20). This book, "The Soul of a Horse" by Joe Camp, is a factual yet emotional story in support of natural horsemanship (see www.thesoulofahorse.com). A book of this quality is capable of not only changing the attitude of the general public (something much needed when jurors can be so misled) but also the horse world.

Camp draws attention to a possible reason why equine practitioners as a whole have failed to support barefoot management. It might be understandable that farriers would (mistakenly I believe) regard iron-free hoof care as a threat to their livelihood - but why veterinarians? Camp writes that the response of his own veterinarian in the USA "*chilled my blood and made me very sad.*" With his permission, I quote from the book:³ "*Dr.Matt told me how things are out in the field. He gets to see a client and treat a horse, usually, only when there's something wrong. An illness or an injury. In other words, rarely. A farrier sees a client every six or eight weeks, maybe eight to twelve times a year. So most horse owners know their farrier much better than they know their vet. If it's a long-term relationship with the farrier, it would stand to reason that he is trusted. One bad word from the farrier about a particular vet, or a good word about some other vet, will be heard. And a farrier is not likely to recommend a vet who he*

³ Camp J (2008): *The Soul of a Horse: Life Lessons from the Herd*, Harmony Books Quoted extract from page 88, courtesy of the Harmony Books division of Random House. See also www.thesoulofahorse.com

knows is going to come in behind him and tell the owner to pull all the shoes off his horses.

Even with existing clients with whom he has good relationships, Dr.Matt has lost patients because he recommended that shoes come off.

The owner calls the farrier about pulling the shoes.

The farrier explains, that “Most vets don’t know much about feet because they don’t work with feet. And, well, you should really think about it before pulling the shoes.” Those words were actually spoken to me by a farrier.

In the above example, either the vet or the farrier is usually going to wind up losing a client because the last thing owners want are folks who disagree about the treatment for their horses. Especially if the owner doesn’t have a clue about which one is right.

The very sad thing about all this is that all the equine vets in the country should be educating themselves on the magical things that can be accomplished with the barefoot wild horse model. And they should be talking to clients about it. But the truth is that it would be difficult indeed for a vet to make it in a community in which he has alienated all the farriers.”

Camp goes on to state: “All populations of modern horses retain the ability to revert to the feral state. The so-called domestic horse and the wild horse are genetically the same. The wild horse model works because the so-called domestic horse and the wild horse are genetically identical. Think seriously about it every time you hear someone say that what they do for a living is better for your horse than what the horse would do for itself in the wild. Mother nature knows best.”

The irony is that while owners are adopting barefoot management programmes with enthusiasm and success, they are obliged to do this in the face of active resistance from veterinarians and farriers - the very people that they would normally look to for support.

In spite of their overall success, the few failures on the part of barefoot trimmers tend to be seized on by the professionals and held up as examples of the whole barefoot program, even though their own failures are manifold. The pot is calling the kettle black. For a veterinarian to say that a barefoot horse cannot work is akin to an engineer saying a bumblebee cannot fly.



Figure 8. *“For a veterinarian to say that a barefoot horse cannot work is akin to an engineer saying that a bumblebee cannot fly,” the author writes.*

Status quo comfort

Revolutions are disturbing. Predictably, a paradigm change in a long-established practice like hoof-care may provoke a knee-jerk rejection among veterinary surgeons. One defence is to pretend that the revolution is not happening.

A tongue-in-cheek article in the British Medical Journal (13) suggested ways to resist change in medicine. The authors proposed that doctors should: pay no attention to research publications: attack the data: maintain absolute confidence in their own opinions: follow the pack: avoid making independent decisions: bring in the lawyers: blame the patients for demanding standard procedures: pull rank: and simply refuse to believe.

Farriers' fears

When applying a set of shoes, a farrier is doing something that he alone can do and for which he feels able to charge a substantial fee. He is proud of his skill and its long tradition. If he was 'simply' asked to trim feet, he might feel that he was being relegated to a less skilful task and this alone might hurt his pride.

But there is also an economic argument for his resistance to the barefoot programme. Just as veterinarians feel more comfortable charging for medicines and surgery than for professional advice, so too may farriers feel that they can charge confidently for iron work but not for (mere) trimming.

In fact, experience has shown that there is nothing “mere” about the ability to trim a foot correctly. In time, farriers will recognize that this too is a skill that deserves

due financial reward. Most owners would prefer not to do their own trimming. As trimming is needed more frequently than shoeing, there will always be plenty of respected work for farriers who hang up their hammers.

A full reference list will be provided at the end of part two.

Part II: PRINCIPLES OF PERSUASION

The *New York Times* bestseller *Made to Stick*, by Chip and Dan Heath (18), provides guidance on how to make quicker use of existing knowledge.

The authors analyze the anatomy of ideas and recognize six principles that can make our ideas more likely to stick. The principles are listed under the mnemonic 'SUCCESS'

- Simplicity
- Unexpectedness
- Concreteness
- Credibility
- Emotion
- Stories

In this article, I will review these principles and suggest how they might be applied to the idea of barefoot horses.

1. SIMPLICITY:

How do we change attitudes? A crucial way is by "example. example, example," a variation of the house seller's mantra, "location, location, location." With the help of barefoot trimmers, educated horse owners have been providing this example for a decade (5).

But how do we do it through the power of the written word? First, don't 'bury the lead.' Find the core of the idea and state it up front. For example, a horse's hooves should expand and contract with every step. They can't do this if the hoof walls are clamped with hoops of steel and "crucified" with seven nails.

Although there are dozens of reasons why it is a good idea to remove the shoes, communication research indicates that less is more. Two reasons are more likely to be remembered than a dozen. For example:

- FLEXIBILITY: The hooves should expand and contract with every step
- MOBILITY: The horse should be on the move most of the day

2. UNEXPECTEDNESS:

Use the element of surprise to get attention. To maintain it, point out the gaps in knowledge and thereby generate curiosity to keep the pages turning.

Satire relies on the unexpected, such as Jonathan Swift's description of the talking horses and the yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* (6). I tried my hand at satire to ridicule the Bronze Age idea of biting (22). The practice of shoeing is equally bizarre and fair game for ridicule. For a prime example of satirical humor in aid of equine welfare, see Michelle Guillot's SuperPrix website at http://pixofthelitter.net/pixofthelitter_007.htm. The same author and artist has created "Felicity Wraithbottom's Blog" on dressage, starting in the May issue 2008 of the online journal 'Horses For Life' (www.horsesforlife.com).

But building on the core idea above ...horse's hooves should expand and contract with every step, because each hoof acts as a supplementary pump for the circulation of blood. A horse has at least five hearts, one in the chest and one in each foot.

3. CONCRETENESS

Beware of using abstract terms and, as much as possible, use concrete images that conjure up something that can be touched, seen or heard. The 'images' may be in words or pictures. As Napoleon may have said, "A good sketch is better than a long speech." Cartoons add 'concreteness' to conceptions. I believe that photographs can remind us that shoeing a horse, like footbinding a girl, deforms the skeleton (See the first article in the series, in VT38.30).

Joe Camp suggests a line that is splendidly 'concrete' and increasingly relevant: *Save money and save your horse at the same time*. When the welfare argument is not enough, perhaps the barefoot programme's cost-effectiveness might impress.

But building again on the core idea: a horse's hooves should expand and contract with every step to reduce the load on the heart but also to act as shock absorbers at the trot or faster paces. Horses should be in some sort of motion for most of the 24-hour day. In my view, a stable is a prison cell and – for a mammal as large as a horse – a very small cell. The standard 'cell' for a horse is equivalent to incarcerating a man in a telephone kiosk. (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The author claims that the standard stable 'cell' for a horse is equivalent to incarcerating a man in a telephone kiosk.

4. CREDIBILITY

How do we make people believe our ideas? Can we cite any figures of authority by way of expert witnesses? External credibility is always effective. Internal credibility works well for some 'try before you buy' approaches (such as a money back warranty) but such a pitch is not applicable to the barefoot programme, in which, after years of shoe-induced deformity, rehabilitation can be lengthy and difficult. One could ask horsemen a question that would encourage them to test the credibility of the idea for themselves - *which would you rather trust, 60 millions years of tried and tested natural selection or the crude and impertinent selection of some anonymous Saxon?*

The word 'impertinent' can be better understood with the help of a time line ...

A horse's foot is a triumph of engineering. Starting with a four-toed mammal the size of a fox terrier, its design has been shaped by 60 million years of evolution. The one-toed modern horse (*equus caballus*) evolved about a million years ago. Let's put aside the first 59 million years of development and reduce the last million to a 24-hour time scale. Within this period, modern man (*homo sapiens*) did not evolve until about 11.10 pm. He first domesticated the horse around 11.53 pm and did not start nailing iron clamps on its toes until some time after 11.58 pm. Attempts to improve the horse by selective breeding commenced about 17 seconds before midnight.

This perspective assures us that the horse's foot today cannot be markedly different from the unshod foot of horses in the Greek and Roman armies.

5. EMOTIONS

How do we get people to care about our ideas? Belief in an idea (credibility) is not enough by itself; we also have to make them care. The *Made to Stick* authors recommend appealing to self-interest to get a message across - spell out 'the benefit of the benefits' and appeal to the user with the WIIFY ('what's in it for you') principle.

Yes, the unshod horse has increased circulation in its hooves and, therefore, increased sensory input for balancing and knowing where to put its feet. But what is the benefit of the benefit? What's in it for you? And the answer might be, *"When your shod horse stumbles, you can be killed. Are you sure you want to take that risk?"*

Another argument could be framed on the likelihood that a shod horse has contracted heels and pain in the navicular region. The question could be: *"Do you want to have to replace your horse when it's nine because it develops navicular disease?"*

The possibilities are endless. A similar question could legitimately be based on the increased risk of a shod horse developing laminitis. Don't forget the importance of the 'you' word. Don't say, *"When a shod horse stumbles, its rider can be killed"* but, *"When your horse stumbles, you can be killed."*

The increased traction of the barefoot horse in all conditions can be appealed to, Responded could be: *"Imagine not having to worry about snow balling-up in your horse's hoof"* or *"Imagine reducing the risk of your horse slipping on the road."* etc.

Although a four-year-old Chinese girl with bound feet might have survived into adolescence and married, she was increasingly crippled as an adult and her life shortened. So it is with the shod and stabled horse in my opinion. Solitary confinement is bad enough for a herd animal but, in addition, the shoe acts like a slow poison. Its worst effects become apparent in maturity when a horse becomes crippled with laminitis or navicular disease.

Again, communication research tells us that a negative argument frequently has a more powerful effect than a positive one (21). Rather than stressing the benefits of the barefoot option, it is better to frame the discussion to focus on the penalties of shoeing. Be negative about the option you don't want people to select.

However, Jones and Motluk (21) warn that some emotions, such as guilt and fear, have to be used with care. If an owner is made to feel guilty about shoeing her horse, this may stiffen her resistance to the barefoot programme. If she is frightened of upsetting her farrier or of making the necessary management changes to transition to barefoot, the same will happen. Similarly, if when talking to an iron-loving farrier about the barefoot program he may begin to fear for his livelihood, one can expect a brief dismissal. It is better in this case to make the WIIFY argument that the barefoot program will actually increase his income.

Whereas the scare tactics of guilt and fear are risky strategies, invoking anger is apparently a seriously underrated tool of persuasion (21). But the anger, of course, has to be directed at someone other than the persuader. Slow-moving organizations like the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) and the racing industry are fair targets for anger. It may be asked why both continue to mandate the use of shoes when, in my view, a more humane and physiologically acceptable option is available?

Resistance to an idea is itself an emotion and one that must not be underestimated. You may be inclined to call it stubbornness but the person to whom you are talking may call it loyalty. The fact remains that even the most logical and compelling of arguments are resisted. Reason alone is not enough.

Plato wrote about sophists who strengthened their arguments by appealing to emotion, and Hume recognized that "*Reason is a slave to passion.*" We don't just reason, we reason with passion. Flanagan agrees, "*we don't just think, we combine thought with emotion – let's call it 'fthinking'*" (23).

If pure logic is successfully resisted, the person resisting concludes that their own arguments must be even stronger (21). Once again, the WIIFY principle is useful to avoid such an impasse. Find an edge. Find some aspect of the argument that does appeal to your target's views, then move towards your goal a little at a time. Try charm. Avoid making people feel bad about themselves. If you can boost their self-esteem they will be more receptive to your message.

Invoking self-interest should not stop at the level of appealing to the more basic human needs such as safety and financial economy. Appeals can be made to many people's desire to show affection and compassion. Increasingly, owners are keener than ever to improve the quality of life of their much-loved horse.

One can appeal to an owner's wish to achieve esteem, to learn more, to enjoy beauty, and reach their full potential in an endeavor that interests them and in which they can make some contribution. This last phrase is the true source of happiness. Because of this it is also one of the most powerful foundations for an appeal.

6. STORIES

“Black Beauty,” by Anna Sewell (1877), was not the first book to be written about animal welfare but it was the first story book .The “Essay on Animals” by Horace Bushnell (1802-76) and the book “Bits and Bearing Reins” by Edward Fordham Flower (2nd edition, 1875)⁴ had some impact because they influenced Sewell but it was not until she wove their message into a story that attitudes began to change and progress was made.

Joe Camp’s book (21)uses ‘emotion’ to show people how they can improve their own life and that of their horse. He does this by telling stories. He believes the best stories are always founded in conflict. And the conflict does not always have to be overcome; the story is the struggle.

Stories prepare us to act faster and more effectively. As part of this they can be powerful persuaders in the business of getting people to accept new ideas; they are wonderful teaching tools. As Chip and Dan Heath explain, stories are “flight simulators for the brain.” The most inspiring stories do not even have to be created; they simply have to be recognized when they occur in real life - recognized and recorded on the spot (carry a notebook and pencil).

The Heaths recognize three basic story plots: challenge, connection and creativity. In the barefoot world, all three plots occur, again and again - for example, the triumph-of-willpower-over adversity and the underdog story (the challenge plot); the help-in-the-time-of-distress and the building-a-relationship story (the connection plot); and the problem solving and mental breakthrough story (the creativity plot). As Mr Camp points out, all three are really conflict plots.

The problem with a factual message and logical reasoning (the sort that most scientists tend to generate) is that it hits the listeners between the eyes and they instinctively respond by fighting back. If I inform a rider of a shod horse that she is being cruel, this will make her defensive and angry. But if I tell her a story about a rider who has been inadvertently cruel out of ignorance, who came to recognize her mistake and removed her horse’s shoes with wonderful results, she will identify with the heroine and be more likely to follow suit.

The following is a sort of fable that further emphasises man’s impertinence ...

What would the genius inventor of a supersonic plane say if, after having spent a lifetime designing, developing and testing his plane, it was subsequently encumbered by some non-engineer with a crude addition that paid no respect to the thought and ingenuity that had already been invested in the original design? Imagine a pair of dustbins being welded to the underside of the precisely

⁴ Flower was a leading campaigner against “the barbarous and senseless use of spurs, whips, curbs, gag bits, and bearing reins.’

engineered wings of his supersonic plane. For 'genius inventor,' read evolution. For 'plane,' read horse. For 'dustbins,' read horseshoes (Figure 2)..



Figure 2. What happens when an unnecessary addition is made to an invention, which pays no respect to the thought and ingenuity invested in the original design?

Real life stories are still the most effective. Thousands of healthy, barefoot horses are still living today that faced a likely sentence of death, when shod, because they were unworkable.

In the summary of "Made to Stick," the authors explain that these stories *are* almost always concrete. Most have emotional and unexpected elements. The hardest part is making sure they are simple and that they reflect your core message. A credible idea makes people believe. An emotional idea makes people care and the right stories make people act.

One factor is yet missing from the six principles; time. We must be patient and plan to live long if we want to see the full flowering of the barefoot movement. As Thomas Paine observed in 1776, "*Time makes more converts than reason.*"

CONCLUSIONS

We need to educate the next generation of riders, veterinarians and non-ferrous farriers (“catch ‘em young”). Perhaps talk to members of The Pony Club and 4H groups. Youngsters are not squeamish about changing the attitude of others. At that age they can get away with being mercilessly direct.

A recent email from the president of a humanitarian and educational equine association in Switzerland tells the story. He explains how the association tries to play fair and avoids putting too much pressure on adult ‘iron-lovers.’ Instead, it gives them time to learn the difference between tradition and science (15, 19, 24). His pupils however - mostly girls between 10 and 16 years old, are not so tolerant. *“It is incredible,”* he writes, *“how this new generation is sensible to horse wellness. They just cannot stay quiet when they meet other young riders using ironed hoof and mouth horses, accusing them of cruelty and being prehistoric-minded people. It is so funny!”* (Figure 3).



A humanitarian and educational equine association in Switzerland reports that its pupils – mostly girls aged between 10 and 16 years – are vocal about horse wellness. The association’s president claims, “They just cannot stay quiet when they meet other young riders using ironed hoof and mouth horses, accusing them of cruelty and being prehistoric-minded people.”

Such refreshing attitudes in the younger generation will make a difference. Education is the only way to improve acceptance of the theory of evolution and it is also the only way to promote the application of advances in equine welfare. Education, a word derived from the Latin root *dux*, meaning ‘leader’ - should employ all of Heaths’ six principles to get the facts across.

Curiously, unlike the situation with the theory of evolution - which is well accepted by scientists but has yet to convince the general public – it is the other way around with the theory of barefoot management. As veterinarians, we have

to ask ourselves why it is that the horse owners are accepting the theory in ever-increasing numbers and successfully putting it into practice, yet our own profession and farriers, as a group, are resisting change?

I hope that I am misinformed and would love to hear that I am but I know of no school of veterinary medicine in any part of the world that has updated their curriculum on the horse's foot to include the paradigm change from shod to unshod.

Many schools have farriers on their staff and, again, as far as I am aware, none of these farriers have hung up their hammers. Where is the leadership that students have a right to expect? Research funding on the horse's foot is still being awarded to workers who appear to be unaware that the horseshoe is the major cause of the two most serious scourges of the horses foot, navicular disease and laminitis. The "knights of the-naked-hoof are not invited to speak at veterinary conferences and their articles are rejected for publication when submitted to peer-reviewed veterinary journals. The majority of horsemen's journals still advocate shoeing.

Unlike the situation with evolution, one group of people in the horse world that possesses the authority to legislate acceptance of proven scientific advances. These are the committee members of organizations that make the rules for horse sports, such as the FEI, national federations like the British Equestrian Federation and the United States Equestrian Federation, and the stewards of racing. Rules can and should be changed. And they should be changed now, not in a hundred years. It is unacceptable that current rules on equipment mandate cruelty. An example was set in February 2008 when the South African National Equine Federation became the first to approve the introduction of bitless dressage classes at graded dressage shows. The approval was given on a trial basis for one year but it is a welcome start to welfare reform.

We need to set a target. We should aim to have at least some horses competing barefoot and bitless by the time of the 2012 Olympic Games. But before we, as a profession, can help achieve this target, we have to be persuaded of the need for reform in equine welfare. Seven years have passed since I first alerted equine veterinarians to the need (5). Let's make an Olympic effort.

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www.bitlessbridle.com

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Part One of the above article triggered a vigorous correspondence in subsequent issues of Veterinary Times. Three readers sent indignant letters to the editor. Dr. Cook responded with two letters by way of response. The full correspondence is appended below:

Letters to the editor of 'Veterinary Times' UK
in response to a 'Point-of-View' article entitled
IS IT TIME FOR HOOF-CARE REVOLUTION?
PART ONE: RESISTANCE TO NEW IDEAS
by Robert Cook, August 11, 2008

August 18, 2008

HOOF TRIMMING METHOD WON'T WIN MY APPLAUSE

Dear editor,

It is with some degree of sadness that I write to express my deep concern at Robert Cook's point of view article (August 11 issue).

Professor Cook refers to the successful prosecutions of Strasser hoof trimmers Fiona Dean and Jo Kowalski for cruelty. Over a period of many months, Kowalski attempted to treat her pony, Bramble, for laminitis by trimming it every "three to four days" by the Strasser method, denying it any conventional

veterinary or farriery treatment (including analgesia). Prof Cook states that it was “a terrible irony that they [the charges] were filed by a welfare organisation, the RSPCA,” which, he believes, “should have applauded and supported their commitment rather taken them to court.” He correctly states that Kowalski intended to appeal against her conviction. I’m sure most readers of this journal will be relieved to learn that she has done so and that her conviction has been upheld. She did receive some mitigation of sentence.

It seems that Kowalski’s dogmatic adherence to Dr Strasser’s method inflicted extreme suffering to her pony. The animal was reduced to staggering around a field with its front legs crossed. A brief video of the animal can be viewed online at www.ilph.org/ukoperations_details.asp?id=652

I would strongly recommend that readers visit the web page and watch the video before reaching their own conclusions about the Strasser method and Kowalski’s culpability. If Prof Cook wishes to applaud this, I’m afraid I will not be joining in the ovation.

Dr Strasser’s comments, at the trial, that Bramble’s hooves had “a good trim”, and that “a sick pony required fresh air, not painkillers” are equally reprehensible in my opinion.

There can be no doubt that, properly trimmed, many horses can work and enjoy happy lives without the benefit of shoeing. However, the use of emotive and unfounded terms such as “shoeing is an indisputable act of cruelty” is inimical to the kind of scientific debate that could advance Prof Cook’s cause.

Yours faithfully,

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My response to the above letter.

September 8, 2008

WHY SHOULD WE WORSHIP FARRIERY?

Dear editor,

Equine veterinary surgeons today are living at an historic moment in the evolution of equine welfare. But sadly, the evolution is taking place without the profession's wholehearted support.

Until recently, two horse management practices have coexisted and both have been regarded as acceptable. For six thousand years, horses have been kept barefoot-&-free (i.e., 'at grass,' if not on free range). For the last thousand years, a smaller population of horses has been kept shod-&-stabled (i.e., predominantly immobile and confined). In the last twenty years, new research has shown that the shod-&-stabled model is seriously flawed and unacceptable on welfare grounds. As with any paradigm change, it will take time for all members of the profession to acknowledge that shoeing and stabling is harmful to the health of the horse and that the barefoot/free model is to be preferred. But curiously, as soon as flaws were found in the shoe/stable model, most farriers and most veterinary surgeons discover, without stating their reasons, that the barefoot/free model is no longer the universally acceptable model that it has been since the horse was first domesticated.

Unsurprisingly, as an examiner for the Worshipful Company of Farriers, Mr. Richard Stephenson (August 18 issue) finds it difficult to support the non-ferrous management model. In disputing my statement that shoeing is cruel he overlooks the definition of cruelty ... the infliction of avoidable pain or suffering. But as the shoe/stable model inflicts both avoidable pain and suffering there is no escaping the logic of my statement. Shoeing is both cruel and the cause of disease.

I believe that one of the reasons why a miscarriage of justice in the RSPCA-v-Kowalski case occurred was because the importance of the word 'avoidable' was not recognized. The rehabilitation of hooves that have been deformed, diseased and hurt by years of shoeing and stabling, can itself be painful. Many legitimate and justifiable procedures in medicine carry such a cost, for example post-operative pain. Such pain, being unavoidable, is not cruel. Indeed, when not excessive, limb pain has a useful function as it prevents overuse.

Mr. Stephenson recommends that readers view a video taken by the ILPH after the pony had been seized, shipped and confined overnight in a stable. But two hours prior to the RSPCA's raid on the owner's premises, this same pony – though lame - was highly mobile and had voluntarily trotted up the field in which

she was safely grazing. Her degree of lameness at the time of the seizure was clearly recorded as “four out of ten” by the veterinary surgeon who examined her on behalf of the prosecution. Yet in court, this same expert witness claimed that he had written ‘nine out of ten.’ Judge Holt noted in his summary that the prosecution’s expert evidence was “unreliable” and that he preferred the evidence of the defendant’s veterinary surgeon. The judge allowed the appeal against the first summons that, between 23rd June 2004 and 20th July 2004, Mrs. Kowalski was guilty of cruelty. She was also unburdened of the requirement to pay the RSPCA’s costs of £58,000.

On the second summons, Mrs. Kowalski’s conviction was upheld. This stated that between 3rd June 2004 and 20th July 2004 she “*caused unnecessary* (i.e. avoidable) *suffering by unreasonably omitting to provide the pony with proper and necessary care and attention*” (emphasis added). Essentially, this related to the owner not having sought veterinary advice during this period. But we should pause here to examine that word ‘proper.’ At some point in recent times, the tacit assumption has been silently adopted that ‘proper’ means shoeing and stabling. Suddenly, and without evidence, it has come to be understood that the barefoot/free model is in some way improper. Clearly, this was the assumption made in court.

The owner’s decision to switch to barefoot/free management was understandable under the circumstances. The shoeing and stabling treatment that her pony had received from veterinary surgeons and farriers for five previous years had failed to cure the problem. Having made a serious study of barefoot/free management, Mrs. Kowalski exercised her right to switch to an approach that made better sense. As testified in court by an independent witness, the pony was making progress under the new regime. It had even been observed playing with other horses in the field. In less than seven weeks, the ‘rope-walking’ gait that the pony had developed under ‘proper’ care was beginning to regress. Had it not been for the unannounced visit of an ILPH officer to Mrs. Kowalski’s premises on 20th July 2004 and the immediate termination of the barefoot/free treatment, the pony would probably have made a full recovery. As it was, the pony was summarily seized, shod and confined in an ILPH stable. Resumption of ‘proper’ care restarted the pony’s deterioration, culminating in euthanasia six months later. A post-mortem examination revealed no evidence of over-trimming or any irreversible changes in the foot. But as it has been said, killing is not a welfare issue.

Mr. Stephenson misleads readers by failing to tell the whole story about the appeal and declines to applaud an owner’s well-considered effort to save her pony. He exemplifies a trait in our profession that does us no credit – our persistent failure to welcome and support the rediscovery of an older management model that, unlike the newcomer, is compatible with the physiological needs of the horse. The barefoot/free model solves many an

intractable problem caused by shoe/stable management. As a profession we should applaud this major advance in equine welfare.

Yours faithfully,

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The following letter was published in the same issue as my response above. This letter comes from a veterinary surgeon who first attended the pony that was the subject of the alleged cruelty in the RSPCA v Kowalski case. Philip Ryder-Davies, like the author of the first letter, Richard Stephenson, is an examiner for the Worshipful Company of Farriers.

September 8, 2008

CONCERN AT LANGUAGE USED IN SHOEING ARTICLE

Dear editor,

As an equine general practitioner for nearly 40 years, albeit one who has owned and shown horses for a large part of his life – and who has a degree in human medicine – I never thought I would write to criticise Bob Cook, who has held such an eminent position in the profession. Professor Cook's article about horses' feet (August 11 issue) was extraordinary. To state that shoeing is an "indisputable act of cruelty" and that it causes "immense suffering" is, in my view, nothing short of disgraceful. To compare it with the binding of feet of Chinese girls is ridiculous. To illustrate his case with photographs of two cases of damage to horses' feet that, completely unrealistically, he claims were caused by shoeing – to compare them with the pedal bones of mustangs – staggeringly unscientific.

The mention of mustangs is strange. The barefoot trimming proponents – and, as it happens, the Cytek farriers – seem to regard the mustang as some sort of yardstick. The mustang is a feral domestic horse, but every single thing about its lifestyle is completely different from that of the horse in the UK. Bedding, soil type, specific use, surface worked on and breeding all have a very profound effect on the feet of our horses.

Prof Cook is decades out of date regarding his opinion of the relationship between vets and farriers. The extraordinary muddled tale about a veterinary surgeon losing clients because he advised them to take their horses' shoes off does not ring true, nor does it reflect the modern, close working practice between two professional groups.

The reality is that the majority of horses in the UK would not be able to work without being shod. I have seen so many horses whose shoes have been removed when they are not working, only to find the feet are so worn by the time they are needed that the animals are not only lame but shoeing them becomes difficult.

It should be remembered that farriers are trained to trim a foot properly: in our experience 'barefoot trimmers' are clearly unable to do this. I am very saddened both to read Prof Cook's article and by the necessity to write this letter.

Yours faithfully,

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[A further letter appeared in the following issue, from Brigadier Jepson, the Veterinary Director and Chief Executive of The Horse Trust \(previously known as the Home of Rest for Horses\)](#)

15 September 2008

BAREFOOT TRIMMERS DO REQUIRE REGULATION

Dear editor,

As a vet with many years of involvement with the scientific development of modern farriery, I feel compelled to respond to Robert Cook's article ("Is it time for hoof-care revolution? Part one: resistance to new ideas." August 11 issue). To claim that shoeing is an indisputable act of cruelty" is sheer unqualified nonsense, as is his comparison of horse shoeing to the foot-binding of children. Mr Cook is mistaken in thinking that there is a dogma about the necessity for horses to be shod. Many horses perform varying degrees of work without shoes. If they are applied correctly, they do not cause the pathology that Mr Cook uses to illustrate his article. There is a recent upsurge in interest in do-it-yourself, barefoot trimming that has resulted in some very real cases of cruelty. The RSPCA prosecutions that Mr Cook is scornful about involved horrendous, agonizing mutilation of the feet by a well-intentioned, but totally misguided and ignorant owner. It is important that anything other than minor cosmetic foot trimming is undertaken by a skilled person with the requisite knowledge of anatomy, physiology, biomechanics and pathology. Registered farriers have this training and contrary to popular belief, are happy to provide this service when it is appropriate to the horse's needs. There is a well-recognized requirement to

regulate the growing band of barefoot trimmers to ensure they have the approved training and an examination of competence that will protect the welfare of horses and the interests of owners.

Yours faithfully,

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My second response to the correspondence was submitted on October 1st 2008 and published in issue #40.

FARRIERY, FORENSICS AND EQUINE WELFARE

October, 2008

Dear Editor,

My article "Is it time for hoof-care revolution. Part one: resistance to new ideas" (August 11 issue) triggered three letters to the editor. I have already replied to the first letter but would like to make some brief observations on the correspondence in general.

- When a fundamental advance is achieved in any field of knowledge, it has the effect of rendering the current model obsolete.
- In the last 20 years, a 'new' paradigm on hoof care in the horse - the barefoot/free model - has been researched and tested (actually, an original paradigm rediscovered)
- The research has shown that the barefoot/free model is infinitely preferable to the shod/stabled model and a major advance in equine welfare.
- It has also exposed the harmful effects of the shod/stabled model.
- Unfortunately, when faced with the logical consequences of the new paradigm, those who have not studied the research and its positive results experience a sense of outrage.
- Because the old paradigm is now avoidable its status changes from acceptable to unacceptable. As shoeing inflicts avoidable pain and suffering, it now falls within the definition of cruelty.
- All three letter writers are outraged at finding themselves wrong-footed by this logic
- But the point was made to emphasize the bizarre nature of the pony's seizure. The RSPCA, a welfare organization, accuses an owner of cruelty who has adopted a system of management compatible with the

physiology of the horse (freedom of movement, barefoot, in the company of the herd), a system that was showing signs of success. Before the charge is proven, it imposes a system of management that is pathophysiological (immobility, solitary confinement and shoeing), a system that had already been unsuccessful in curing the problem for the previous five years and which, after another six months, had to be terminated by euthanasia. Years later, in court, and only after an appeal, the charge of cruelty is ruled to be incorrect.

- All three letters come from veterinary surgeons associated with the Worshipful Company of Farriers (two veterinary examiners and one past Master)
- The Farriers (Registration) Acts of 1975 and 1977 do not give farriers the monopoly on trimming hooves. Rigorous certification schemes for hoof trimmers are already in place, complete with requirements for annual re-certification.
- In her Crown Court appeal, Mrs Kowalski's conviction on the first summons was squashed. This was the more serious of the two summonses, being an alleged crime of commission. In spite of the repeal, correspondents persist in stating that she was guilty as charged. Good manners and possibly the law on libel require that this should stop.
- As noted by Judge Holt in his Crown Court summary, the seizure of the pony by the RSPCA was illegal
- The abnormal gait of the pony Brambles (the clinical sign that triggered the summonses) developed prior to Mrs Kowalski becoming the owner. The abnormality developed while the pony was shod and stabled and in the care of veterinary surgeons and farriers
- Mr Philip Ryder-Davies, one of the three correspondents, was the veterinary surgeon who attended Brambles at the onset of her laminitis in 1998/9
- Brigadier Jepson, as Chief Executive of The Horse Trust and controller of scientific research grants to an ongoing value of £8 million, has a unique opportunity to support an historic advance in equine welfare. An appointment such as his carries with it both power and responsibility. I appeal to him, on behalf of the horse, to reconsider the opinion he expresses in his letter to the editor.

Yours faithfully

ROBERT COOK, PhD, FRCVS
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Chestertown, MD 21620
USA

PS: A kind friend from the UK writes to me as this letter goes to press, to tell me that my recent articles and letters have convinced many of my peers that I am an old man who has gone slightly off his rocker. As such an opinion may result in

my words being dismissed like the ravings of the soothsayer in 'Julius Caesar,'
let me assure readers that I am only 77, in good health and of a sound mind.
The soothsayer was not mad ... Caesar was assassinated. Shakespeare gets
the last word...

*Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.*