

# **EDUCATED OWNERS AND BAREFOOT HORSES: An open letter to veterinarians**

August 2001

Dear Colleagues,

Dr. Hiltrud Strasser of Tuebingen, Germany has studied the horse's hoof for the last twenty years. Through her clinical work and publications she has demonstrated that the horseshoe is an unnecessary evil. Prior to July of this year, I had known of this research through her two remarkable books, published in English (Strasser and Kells, 1998, Strasser, 1999).<sup>1</sup> These alone were sufficient to convince me that her work represented a major contribution to equine welfare and veterinary medicine. Accordingly, I had no hesitation in nominating her, last year, to the 'International Veterinarian's Hall of Fame' run by the American Farrier's Journal.

However, as Ernst Mach observed in 1897, "no one disturbs his fellow men with a new view unpunished." Judging by the lack of citations of Strasser's work in podiatric papers it would appear that the veterinary profession, by and large, has not noticed her contributions. Nevertheless, this very paucity of comment actually tells us something important. Had her revolutionary findings been false, there is little doubt that one or more authors would by now have published a refutation. Yet no such publication has appeared. An inability to falsify a hypothesis constitutes powerful evidence in favor of its validity.

During July 2001, Strasser gave a series of seminars in North America, at sites from Ontario to Florida. Having now had an opportunity to meet Strasser and audit one day of her three-day seminar in Pennsylvania, I am more convinced than ever that her outstanding research merits the most careful attention by all equine veterinarians. As there is considerable misunderstanding of her work and objectives, I would like to provide a description of the seminar I witnessed.

The seminar was fully subscribed and attended by one veterinarian, several farriers and about 30 horse owners. The participants were well-informed, intelligent, caring people and their open-mindedness was refreshing. The first day of the three-day seminar comprised a lecture format. In this time, Strasser covered the anatomical fundamentals and physiological requirements of the horse's hoof. She also explained why these requirements were transgressed by shoeing and by traditional styles of horse management. I did not hear these lectures but, having studied her books, I am sure that she emphasized the needs of a horse for the herd, and the needs of its feet for movement, moisture and a terrain appropriate to the breed.

The second day, which was the day I audited, consisted of lectures, demonstrations and a practical session. The morning session was a lecture format, in which Strasser covered the basics of a physiological hoof trim. Her approach followed an anatomical progression and differed from that which is taught in conventional farrier's courses. In addition she outlined what occurs during the transitional and rehabilitation period of the

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<sup>1</sup> To purchase, contact [editor@thehorseshoof.com](mailto:editor@thehorseshoof.com)

lame or shod horse that is to become a high-performance barefoot horse. The lectures were followed, after a short lunch break, by a commentary on some videotapes.

Using a cadaver specimen, Strasser then gave a practical demonstration of trimming. Her preference during these introductory-level seminars is to demonstrate on a normal hoof. However, this was not possible and the reason provided a stark reminder of the currently unacceptable standard of hoof care. In preparation for the course, 140 cadaver legs (from 35 horses) had been collected from a slaughterhouse. From this extensive collection, Strasser was unable to find a normal hoof! As a result she had to start by giving a critique of the deformed hoof she was about to work on. I found this to be quite fascinating and, for me, a particularly interesting part of the demonstration. Finally, the participants gained hands-on practice, trimming cadaver hooves under supervision.

The third day consisted of continued practice in the trimming of cadaver hooves, together with a trimming demonstration on a live horse (the horse was owned by the attending veterinarian and volunteered by her for this purpose). It was explained in the course brochure "Horse owners who have made the necessary prior arrangements may trim their own horses in the afternoon under the supervision of a Certified Strasser Hoof Care Specialist." However, Strasser did not undertake to diagnose or treat lame horses and, throughout the clinic, she constantly referred participants to their veterinarians over such matters.

In spite of some unfamiliarity with the language, Strasser was an effective, credible, and confident lecturer. She spoke quietly and handled probing questions with ease and pleasantness. There was no defensiveness in her answers. She simply explained the basic science that supported her reasoning and drew effectively on her extensive knowledge and practical experience.

I came away with a much better understanding of Strasser's logical approach to trimming and of the sound criteria on which this approach was based. It was a red-letter day for me and I only wished that I had had access to this information 50 years ago. The spirit of Bracy Clark, a veterinarian who had tried to tell his colleagues some of these same truths 200 years ago, was alive and well in Hiltrud Strasser! I was proud to claim Clark as an alumnus of my own school, the Royal Veterinary College, London. But I was also rather ashamed that my school had failed to give him the support he deserved and had even tried to suppress his findings. As human nature has not changed in the last two centuries, I fear that the veterinary profession may fail, once again, to take advantage of the second chance that Strasser is now offering. In fact, her work does not threaten anyone. It provides equine practitioners with valuable solutions to previously intractable problems and it actually increases the amount of work for farriers.

Strasser's message, in essence, is disarmingly simple. First, keep the horse in an environment that bears a similarity to its natural environment (something that is within the capability of most horse keepers today and should be as obligatory as the provision of food and water). Secondly, allow the foot to be the shape and consistency that nature intended. The first requirement means that a horse must not be confined to a stall for 23 hours out of 24 each day. The second requires that millions of years of hoof evolution should be allowed to do the job it has evolved to do. At the risk of oversimplification, the message is "no shoe, no stall, and no stagnation."

Currently, horse owners are showing a greater readiness to study and adopt Strasser's recommendations on hoof care than either veterinarians or farriers. Because of this, both veterinarians and farriers may soon find themselves in the embarrassing situation of being faced with owners who have a better understanding of the truth about the hoof than they do. Unfortunately, this could lead to veterinarians becoming increasingly sidelined on the topic of hoof care. Nevertheless, the present position is that most owners would still much prefer that veterinarians advised them on the Strasser principles relating, for example, to the treatment of navicular disease and laminitis. But if they are unable to find veterinarians who have made themselves familiar with these principles, they will undoubtedly seek advice from the increasing numbers of Strasser certified hoof care specialists.

Similarly, most owners of young, unshod horses with healthy hooves would also much prefer that farriers carried out the Strasser trim for them. But if they are unable to locate a farrier who has studied this work and can apply its principles, responsible owners are sufficiently motivated to seek the help of Strasser-certified hoof care specialists or even to learn how to do it for themselves.

For the good of the horse it is vital that members of faculty at veterinary schools worldwide should become familiar with this evolution of knowledge. If veterinary students currently being trained are not introduced to these new concepts they will, in my opinion, have legitimate reasons for complaining about the quality of their instruction in this section of the curriculum. Further information about Strasser's work and the barefoot movement in general is now available on an increasing number of websites. Before long there will be an official Strasser website at [www.strasserhoofcare.com](http://www.strasserhoofcare.com) and also a comprehensive veterinary textbook authored by Hiltrud Strasser and Sabine Kells<sup>2</sup>. In the meantime, websites that present and discuss her work include but are not limited to [www.hufklinik.de](http://www.hufklinik.de), [www.thehorseshoof.com](http://www.thehorseshoof.com), <http://members.screenz.com/gretchenfathauer>, [www.ibem.org.uk](http://www.ibem.org.uk), [www.TribeEquus.com](http://www.TribeEquus.com), [www.unitedhorsemanship.com](http://www.unitedhorsemanship.com),

If one considers the history of the horse since its domestication about five or six thousand years ago, the horseshoe can be classified as a relatively recent invention. The horses of the Greek and Roman armies were barefoot, as were the cavalry of the Mongolian horsemen. It is only within the last 1000 years that it has come to be believed that shoes are necessary 'to protect the hoof.' Strasser has shown us that shoes do not protect the hoof. On the contrary, their effect is quite the reverse. Shoes are a primary cause of reduced performance, much incurable lameness and a shortened lifespan. It is a matter for rejoicing that we can at last correct this long-standing error in horse management and eliminate the suffering and wastage we have caused by nailing iron clamps on the toenails of our one-toed grazers.

A good hypothesis is a bold hypothesis, as the bolder it is the more vulnerable to falsification. Strasser's hypothesis that shoes are harmful to the health of the horse is, undeniably, a bold hypothesis. She has had the courage to question 1000 years of accepted methodology and put forward a better alternative. Furthermore, as a scientist with integrity, having advanced such a scandalous idea, she has been the first to try and invalidate it. With this in mind, she has tested the hypothesis on many types of horses, over a long period of years, and under a wide variety of conditions. The hypothesis has

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<sup>2</sup> "The Hoofcare Specialist's Handbook: Hoof Orthopedics and Holistic Lameness Rehabilitation."

withstood her own attempts to falsify it, for the results have satisfied not only her but also countless numbers of horse owners. In accordance with the rules of science she has also taken pains to publish the protocols of her experiment and even to train others, so that they can repeat the experiment and test it for themselves. Once again, when others carry out the experiment based on her hypothesis it withstands the acid test of repeatability, as similar results can be achieved.

It is my belief that Strasser's work has already met the most stringent criteria of science and that the next step is up to us, her colleagues in the veterinary profession. The least we can do is to study her work, to listen and learn. It is my sincere hope that Dr. Hiltrud Strasser will soon be deluged with invitations to speak at equine veterinary conferences around the world.

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#### **References**

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<sup>3</sup> Curriculum vitae available at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)