



## **My Journey with Acupuncture** **By Kelly L. Stewart, DVM**

I became interested in veterinary acupuncture during my clinical year as a veterinary student at the University of Florida. I was skeptical when starting the Integrative Medicine rotation – I had heard phrases like chi deficiency, yin and yang, bladder 22, fire personality...it all just sounded like gibberish and couldn't possibly have any actual scientific basis...well, I was soon proved wrong.

Animals cannot experience the “placebo effect” and after personally seeing significant physical progress from acupuncture and herbal treatments in cats, dogs, and horses, I sought out explanations. Consequently, I came to understand how Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM) concepts are actually compatible with current conventional Western concepts. In fact, for many diseases, the two forms of medicine can be integrated to provide a better outcome than either medicine alone. Additionally, for other diseases that currently have no conventional treatment, TCVM has shown effectiveness in some cases. I came to the conclusion that not having a basic foundation in TCVM would be a dis-service to my patients.

### **History of Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is a solid component of the healthcare system in China and has been since potentially the Neolithic period 10,000 years ago! The practice was rarely seen in the United States until 1972 when President Nixon visited China. Since then, there has been an explosion in interest and it's application to Western medicine. The use of acupuncture to treat veterinary patients began in China for the royal horses of the Emperor. A man named Bo Le lived around 659-621 BC and he was an expert judge of the swiftest horses. He began applying acupuncture to horses to prevent disease and keep them performing well. In contrast, dogs and cats have only been treated with acupuncture for approximately the past 100 years in China. Although its origins are derived from antiquity, acupuncture has been modified and improved over the years and scientific evidence now backs what were once theories.

### **Acupuncture Basics**

Most acupuncture points are located along the 14 major meridians that run through the body. These meridians are basically roadways for energy flow throughout the body from one point to another. When there is a disruption in the flow, we call it stagnation, and that leads to imbalances in the body, disease and pain. The acupuncture points themselves are areas of decreased electrical resistance, and increased electrical conductivity. They are centralized locations for a high density of free nerve endings, blood vessels, lymphatics, and mast cells. Stimulation of these points act locally and then spread via the nervous system to the brain, which then tells the body to make different chemicals and hormones to attempt to heal itself. Sticking a tiny needle at very specific acupuncture points causes release of the body's own natural opioids, endorphins, serotonin, anti-inflammatory agents and may cause muscle relaxation. Sounds pretty great, right?

### **Conditions Amenable to Acupuncture**

Now you might be wondering what we can actually treat with acupuncture. The National Institute of Health (NIH) has recognized the use of acupuncture for many disease conditions such as arthritis and musculoskeletal pain, gastrointestinal problems, lung disease, reproductive disorders, allergies, and neurologic diseases. In horses, it can be used for the same types of disease and illness. Its use is significant in horses for the relief of musculoskeletal pain. A clinical trial using electro-acupuncture in performance horses suffering from chronic back pain showed successful relief of the signs of back pain. The relief lasted at least two weeks compared to the control group on oral phenylbutazone (“bute”) that did not effectively relieve the symptoms.

If you have horses in Florida you may be all too familiar with the disease anhidrosis or a “non-sweater.” Some horses in the heat of the summer lose the ability to sweat. There is little scientific evidence about why or how this

happens or how to treat it, but acupuncture has shown some promising results in helping these horses to become more heat tolerant and even begin sweating again.

### **Acupuncture Summary**

In conclusion, acupuncture is a safe and effective treatment for many different disease processes in the horse. There are virtually no side effects except for occasional bleeding at the acupuncture site, when the needle is removed – which may actually be therapeutic! Acupuncture can complement conventional medical and surgical therapies. Acupuncture can be useful to promote recovery in some conditions such as acquired deafness, nerve injuries and other disorders that have no conventional treatments. For geriatric animals, acupuncture is an effective treatment to reduce arthritic pain, stimulate the appetite and increase their cognitive function and overall energy level. Acupuncture overall is an effective treatment to improve the quality of life of the horses we love and serve.

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