

ON THE RECENT PROSECUTIONS BY THE RSPCA OF UK HOOF TRIMMERS

Definition of cruelty: The infliction of avoidable distress or suffering

The following signs of pain and distress are frequently (though not exclusively) caused by shoeing:

- Lameness of all sorts and degrees, including career-ending navicular syndrome and potentially fatal laminitis
- Short or choppy stride
- Adoption of relief postures and unnatural movement: arched back, inability or reluctance to lie down, standing with feet under (bunched-up), Steep shoulder angle
- Conformational flaws in hoof (contracted heels, 'club foot,' quarter cracks, flat soles, poor horn quality, high heels, long toes, white line separation and many other defects)
- Conformational flaws in joints and legs (upright pasterns, bucked knees, bowlegs etc.)
- Muscular tension in various parts of the body, particularly the shoulder, neck and face
- Over-developed shoulder muscles
- Sensitive areas (pain in the back, for example)
- Lack of appetite
- Diarrhea
- Abnormal facial expressions due to muscle tension
- Restlessness ('cage walking' etc)
- Aggressions and deterioration of attitude to handling and work
- Flight (refusal to be caught in its paddock, lying down during saddling, 'rushing' at work, refusing at fences etc)
- Dullness or 'saintly behavior' ... depression and absence of all spirit, coat and eyes dull
- Refusal to work (e.g., stopping dead in tracks, at trot and canter)
- Premature retirement and a young life frequently terminated by euthanasia

Opinion

The above represents an incomplete list of the clinical signs of disease and distress caused by shoeing. As the pain, distress and suffering is unnecessary and avoidable (a non-painful and barefoot method of hoof care management having been described, tested, and found to be preferable) it follows that shoeing should, in the light of this new knowledge, be reclassified as a cruel practice. The cruelty of shoeing is long-standing and persistent. It is practiced by farriers

who have failed to keep up with advances in their profession and, therefore, failed to adopt a more humane method of hoof care, developed as the result of research carried out in the last 20 years. The new method has been extensively published and successfully demonstrated, worldwide, in the last five years. Educational programs have been established whereby the method can be learned and its practitioners monitored.

Unfortunately, there is always a lag time between research being completed and its results being applied. Due to the slowness with which the improved method of hoof care has been adopted by farriers and supported by veterinarians, concerned and educated owners have been obliged to practice the method themselves without the guidance and assistance of professional help. They are assisted in this by lay hoof trimmers who have studied the method and who, in general, are doing a wonderful job. Such pioneers should be thanked for their efforts on behalf of equine welfare when they undertake the rehabilitation of shod horses, many being horses with hoof problems that professionals have already abandoned as incurable. The large majority of such cases are successfully rehabilitated. If a small minority of cases prove too far advanced to be saved, this is not surprising, especially with regard to a disease such as laminitis that carries a grave prognosis from the very outset.

It is not being suggested, at this transitional phase in the history of hoof care, that farriers should be prosecuted for cruelty. They must be given time to continue their further education. They need to abandon a practice that was first introduced in the Middle Ages and which is fundamentally no different now than it was in the 13th century. In the meantime, it ill becomes a farrier, who has been inflicting unnecessary pain to accuse a hoof trimmer of cruelty when he/she tries to correct hoof damage brought about by a farrier in the first instance. It is even more inappropriate when an accusation of cruelty is false, by definition. Shoeing results in the infliction of avoidable pain and suffering and is therefore, by definition, cruel. In contrast, any pain that a horse might inevitably have to endure during the transition from shod to barefoot is unavoidable. As it is unavoidable, it is not cruel.

Conclusion

The veterinary profession and the RSPCA both have a responsibility to further the welfare of the horse. The barefoot management program provides an opportunity to achieve a welfare advance of historic proportion. In order to avoid miscarriages of justice in the future, it is imperative that equine oriented members of both bodies should equip themselves with a proper understanding of the program's overall validity and superiority to the traditional practice of shoeing. Any perceived weaknesses in the barefoot management program as it is presently being promoted are weaknesses of detail such as can be expected in a new method, rather than fundamental flaws. The argument could be made that

whereas the barefoot management program may only be 95% defensible, the shoeing program is 100% indefensible.

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