

Equine Osteopathy

By Marcia DuBois, DVM, CVA

For years, I had heard from my friends in the holistic horse community that equine osteopathy as practiced by a small group of European trained osteopaths was nothing short of amazing. Several years ago, I had been scheduled to study with Pascal Evrard, one of the founders and key figures in the development of this technique. Pascal founded the International School of Equine Osteopathy and is the author of the only textbook written on the subject, "Introduction [to] Osteopathy Applied to the Horse". Unfortunately, this book is currently available only in French.

Tragically, my plans were altered when Pascal was killed suddenly in an automobile accident. It was a sad day for all of us who strive to provide the optimum in holistic care to our equine patients. We were fortunate that Pascal's friend and colleague Janek Vluggen picked up the torch and continued to practice and advance the science of Equine Osteopathy. Born in the Netherlands, Janek currently resides in Germany where he has a thriving human practice as well. He holds a degree in osteopathy from the International Academie of Osteopathy in Gent, Belgium. It was in school that Janek met Pascal. Janek and Pascal renewed their relationship when they met following a lecture Janek was giving to a group of Dutch osteopaths. Following this meeting, Janek began teaching at the International School of Equine Osteopathy. We are fortunate that he has started two schools of osteopathy in the United States to train future generations of equine healers.



Andrew Taylor Still, an American physician, founded osteopathy in 1874. The 1800s were a time in world medicine when physicians began to question their current methods of treating the sick. Remember that at this time, bleeding patients was a common practice that frequently resulted in death. Toxic materials were also commonly used to treat various illnesses. For instance, large doses of mercury were used to treat venereal disease resulting in mercury toxicity. George Washington's

famous false teeth were the direct result of the overzealous use of mercurial compounds. There evolved several theories of medicine based on the vitalistic/ holistic theory. The

vitalist physicians believed that the body contained an animating force that was capable of directing the self-repair of the body. Therefore, they believed that the body knew what was best for it and that treatments should be aimed at strengthening the body's defense mechanisms, not suppressing them. Some of the techniques employed by vitalistic physicians today include osteopathy, chiropractic, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and homeopathy.

To understand osteopathy, one must first understand what makes holistic medicine different from allopathic or traditional medical techniques. The traditional veterinarian looks at each problem or symptom as an isolated incident. Each symptom is treated separately as if it exists in a vacuum. Holistic techniques recognize restrictions in the flow of the vital force. Vital force is a term that is difficult to define but it is the life force that animates the tissues. The Chinese Medicine practitioners call it Qi. The chiropractors call it innate intelligence. Homeopaths call it the vital force. It is the self-regulating force within the body that maintains homeostasis and promotes self-healing. Treatments involve working with the vital force, not the individual symptom the body is exhibiting. No matter where the current problem is, the entire body is involved and must be treated. Each of the above disciplines uses different techniques for manipulating the vital force. Osteopathy uses mechanical manipulation.

Osteopathy focuses on the free flow of fluids in the body. An area where the flow is restricted is termed a blockade. Areas beyond the blockade experience a decrease in the flow of nutrients into the area and also a decrease in the flow of toxins out of the area. This leads to poor oxygenation and the build up of toxic materials resulting in devitalization of the affected tissue. This devitalized tissue is called the terrain. It is because the terrain is present that the disease process is allowed to develop - not the other way around. In other words, a bacterium is allowed to invade the body and reproduce because the tissue is devitalized first. The bacteria perpetuate the devitalization; they don't initiate it. Osteopathy uses a series of physical adjustments - of the skeleton and/or internal organs - to release the blockade and return the terrain to normal. Once the tissue normalizes (generally within the first three days post treatment), the self-healing mechanisms can "kick-in" and the bacteria are expelled. Antibiotics may kill the bacteria, but if the terrain is allowed to remain, the infection will return and become a chronic problem.



I had the opportunity to learn from Janek Vluggen as he presented the first in a series of Equine Osteopathy training seminars at the Whole Horse Clinic in San Marcos, Texas. Janek is not your typical Texas horseman. He is tall and thin, a little too thin, at least by

American standards. He sports a curly ponytail and pierced ears. He has abundant energy that seems to be fueled by nothing more than the unfiltered hand-rolled cigarettes that seem to be ever present. I think he could have continued to teach round the clock if we could have kept up with him. The lecture portion consisted of anatomy in a depth that I don't think I have ever seen. I know we didn't get that much detail in veterinary school. It is the level on which he understands anatomy that makes him so effective. He knows the interconnections of the bones, muscles, nerves, vasculature, and sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, on a level that it is almost instinctual. He no longer has to think about it; he just feels it. It is a testimony to the strength of his personality that he could lecture in such depth on rather dry subject matter and not put the entire room to sleep!

He understands horses, their bodies as well as their minds. Part of his understanding comes from riding. Janek is a competitor in the cutting horse world. As he performs his examination he is light on his feet, quick and flexible... much like a dancer. What makes this so remarkable is that he fractured both legs below the knee in a motorcycle accident. Yet, he has no limp and does not hesitate to squat or kneel. He is a walking advertisement for his own technique. "Flexibility is the key to adaptability" seems to be his mantra. While working with a horse, he makes himself insignificant. This is something he stressed many times. "If you remain insignificant the horse will not care about you and will let you do what you want to him" is a statement often repeated throughout the clinic. No horse needed sedation or twitching in order to insure cooperation. While walking around the horse he tells us to wait until we are invited in before we begin. It is the respect he shows for the horse that allows him to make it look so easy. The horse willingly participates, allowing Janek to hold up a hind leg with a single fingertip.



He watches the horse move with a critical eye, asking us what we see. What we see is not necessarily what he sees. The answers he wants goes beyond the superficial things most of us learned in school. We were not taught to observe or to feel but to rely on tests, radiographs and blocks. Observation is a skill that needs to be developed. He knows before he touches the horse where most of the problems lie. He runs his hands gently over the patient pointing out the changes that may not be noticeable to us. Some are so slight that they can barely be felt. Feeling or palpation is another much underutilized skill. As he finds a

blockade, he explains what problems it may cause, both locally and distally. Remember, we are considering the whole animal here. No symptom exists in isolation. External blockades can cause internal problems. Once we understand what areas lie beyond the blockade, it is easy to key into problems with the internal organs. Janek would locate a

blockade and tell us that we should look at the liver or kidneys. We were of course skeptical at first. But, time after time we confirmed what he told us by conventional testing such as ultrasound or laboratory testing.

The best part of this entire experience was watching him clear the blockades and observing the changes in the horse. One owner brought us a horse that she had rescued. She described him as her hyper child, never standing still and having no manners. As Janek performed his magic, the horse calmed and lowered his head and closed his eyes, taking deep relaxed breaths. The owner was amazed. She had never seen him calm before. He moved off without the pain and restrictions that he had come in with. We could see it and the owner could also. It is a wonderful experience to see a horse relax and to become whole in just a few moments. All without drugs or a three ring circus. He worked on several ranked barrel racers that day. One particular gelding came in with hindquarter problems. Janek told us that the horse had kidney and bladder problems. He put on a glove and ran his hand into the sheath. This horse was fully awake and not in stocks. He found a large bean...golf ball size large. He also found an old adhesion from his gelding surgery. He gently broke down that adhesion and the horse relaxed and could move normally. Janek is the exception to the rule that those who can do, and those who can't teach. He can do both quite well.

Whether you have performance horses or pleasure horses, you should be incorporating holistic treatment plans into your horse's total health program. The best equine practitioners are those who utilize a total horse approach. I am glad that people like Janek exist to raise the bar on equine health care. I know that those of us who choose to study with him will not regret it and our patients will be better for it. If you are interested in having an equine osteopathic evaluation for your horse, call The Whole Horse Clinic in San Marcos, Texas or Well Being Center for Animal Healing in Houston, Texas. 🐾

About the author:

Dr. Marcia DuBois is a 1990 graduate of Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine and is certified in Veterinary Acupuncture by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society. After practicing traditional allopathic medicine for 10 years, she became frustrated with its limitations. Searching for a safer and more effective approach to healing, she began studying acupuncture, homeopathy, energetic medicine and herbal therapies. She is the owner of Well Being Center for Animal Healing in Houston, TX - a holistic practice that treats small animals, exotics and equids. Her practice philosophy is "less is more".

