



Left: Roy Schnell applies a chiropractic treatment to an equine patient. "It's important to know a horse's history — not just any past injuries, but how the horse is used," he explains. "How often it is ridden and for what purpose can have a lot to do with the problem at hand."

Story & photos by
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Alternative Therapies Gain Acceptance

Animal chiropractic and acupuncture are earning respect of veterinarians and livestock owners as supplemental therapy and sometimes cure for maladies ranging from indigestion to performance injuries.



Schnell stimulates nerves by applying a series of small electric pulses to specific acupuncture points.

If you're a cow-calf producer whose breeding program requires multiple bulls, you know that bulls will fight among themselves. A certain amount of bellowing, pawing of dirt and jostling around is to be expected. It's the nature of the bovine beast to establish a pecking order. Arguably, a certain amount of competitive behavior is desirable in the breeding pasture, but combative bulls can be a real aggravation to their manager. They take a toll in damages to facilities and may pose a danger to handlers. It's really disappointing when a valuable animal is permanently injured.

Jud Baldrige feared that had happened a couple of years ago to a young bull-pen combatant. An Angus breeder based at North Platte, Neb., Baldrige develops bulls in fairly large groups. In this instance, fighting left one 18-month-old bull with a neck injury. The obvious symptom — carrying the head low and cocked to one side — persisted. Naturally, the injured fellow was one of the better bulls.

"This was a pretty good bull that we had planned to offer in our next production sale," tells Baldrige. "I didn't know how it would work or if it would work for cattle, but I'd heard about successful chiropractic treatment of injuries in horses. I decided to explore it and see if it might help this bull."

Baldrige did a little networking, asked a lot of questions and wound up with a referral to Roy Schnell, an area veterinarian who is also certified in animal chiropractic and acupuncture. At that point, practically all of Schnell's patients were horses, but he agreed to try.

"With the bull in the chute, Schnell managed to manipulate the bull's spine. He also used acupuncture with an electronic line between the needles. Right away, the bull seemed to feel better," says Baldrige.

Schnell returned three times to administer follow-up acupuncture treatments, and the bull gradually, but steadily, improved. While the injured bull had to be pulled from the auction line-up, he later sold at private treaty, recovered and was capable of doing the job breeding bulls are meant to do.

"We were satisfied with the outcome — even a little surprised at how well it turned out," adds

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Baldrige. “And we’ll consider using those treatments again if there’s a future need.”

Controversial treatment

Chiropractic and acupuncture remain somewhat controversial in both human and animal medicine. It’s likely that

skeptics still outnumber true believers. Schnell says he was skeptical of human chiropractic until he sought treatment for an injury to his own back. It happened while loading irrigation pipe. Thereafter, it didn’t take much strain to bring back the pain.

“Tired of my complaining, my wife

kept urging me to try a chiropractor,” grins Schnell, who reluctantly agreed. “It turned my life around.”

For relief from back pain, the last recourse proved to be most effective. It made Schnell reconsider the potential of alternative methods of pain management. He wondered if chiropractic worked for



Schnell became a believer when human chiropractic was the most effective therapy for his own back pain. He wondered if chiropractic worked for humans, wouldn’t it work for animals, too? He has since become certified in animal chiropractic and acupuncture.

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Through training in animal chiropractic, Schnell advanced his knowledge of the interconnectedness of the spinal column, bones and joints to the nervous system. He learned how even slight changes in joint alignment can hinder movement and cause inflammation and pain. Schnell studied techniques for restoring out-of-kilter joints to normal position by applying low-amplitude force. He also learned that successful chiropractic treatment begins with proper diagnosis.

Diagnosis is sometimes difficult in animals. They can’t explain where it hurts, and the clues are sometimes subtle. Many large animals, particularly horses, are stoic. They often hide the little hurts, so a horse that’s obviously lame is probably experiencing a lot of pain. Many joint-alignment problems are not obvious, but may be revealed through small abnormalities of gait. A shortened stride or slight restriction of movement can be a symptom of discomfort. It might show in the animal’s general posture, as it obviously did with the Baldrige bull. Sometimes, though, the most visible sign is a change in the animal’s attitude or disposition.

Many of Schnell’s chiropractic patients are performance horses used in competitive events, including barrel racing, steer wrestling and roping. Besides strenuous work, these horses are often transported long distances by trailer, which can also subject them to physical strain. In Schnell’s experience, the source of problems in performance horses is often found in their hips, even when symptoms are manifested as lameness or restricted movement in their front ends. In cases where horses are reluctant or refuse to give their heads one way or the other, it’s often a cervical

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issue — sometimes due to an old injury.

“It’s important to know a horse’s history — not just any past injuries, but how the horse is used,” explains Schnell. “How often it is ridden and for what purpose can have a lot to do with the problem at hand.”

In feedlot horses, for example, problems are more often in the withers. It can be due to ground conditions, since these horses must maneuver through mud and travel over hard surfaces, too. Repeated strain can occur when pen riders frequently lean forward and to the side while opening and closing gates.

However, Schnell says too much generalization is dangerous. Each case should be evaluated individually. While the source of a problem may start in one area, patients often benefit from adjustment to multiple areas of the skeleton. Likening it to a jigsaw puzzle, Schnell says the musculoskeletal system must fit together correctly. Different animals respond differently, too, and he admits that not every animal responds favorably to treatment.

“I generally have more success when treating acute injuries than chronic problems, so I think time often is a factor,” Schnell explains. “When treatment is successful, [the animal] may show immediate relief following adjustment. Some of them really seem to enjoy the treatment.”

Acupuncture

Even after becoming more open-minded about alternative therapy and embracing animal chiropractic, it took another five years for Schnell to fully accept acupuncture as a legitimate therapy. An ancient Chinese medical treatment, acupuncture was often described as a method for balancing the body’s “invisible energy” through manipulation of needles inserted, at specific points, in the patient’s skin. That seemed more like hocus pocus than science-based therapy.

Schnell came to understand acupuncture as a neuromuscular stimulation technique that can work for scientific reasons. When an acupuncture needle is inserted in the proper location and given a little twist, nerves can be mechanically stimulated to send impulses to associated muscles and tissues — even internal organs.

Putting it in layman’s terms, Schnell likens the nervous system to a communication conduit through which information flows to the brain, and messages from the brain flow to the body’s various parts. Acupuncture can be used to stimulate nerves directly, and chiropractic can help alleviate improper joint alignment that may hinder the function of the many nerves surrounding joints.

“In my experience,” states Schnell, “many patients respond favorably to chiropractic and most respond favorably to acupuncture, but I’ve had the greatest success when using chiropractic and acupuncture together. They have a

synergistic effect, especially for managing pain and hastening recovery after an injury.”

Veterinarian Tim Holt agrees. He first sought training in chiropractic and acupuncture to apply in his mixed-animal practice in Gunnison, Colo. Now he teaches courses in animal acupuncture at

Colorado State University’s Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

“In private practice, I used chiropractic and acupuncture in both large and small animals, often in combination. One complements the other,” says Holt, who believes attitudes toward alternative therapies have changed significantly since

the 1990s, when he began implementing them in his practice.

“They’re used a lot for small animals now,” adds Holt. “Therapy for hip dysplasia in dogs is one example, but also for treating cats and other pets — even birds and reptiles — for problems ranging from injuries to allergies and asthma.”

In large animals, chiropractic and acupuncture are probably used most commonly as therapy following injury. Holt notes how such therapies are increasingly applied to relieve sore backs and torn muscles sustained in the rodeo arena by bucking bulls. However, Holt says evidence is growing that alternative therapies can be effective in treating a wide variety of maladies in beef cattle, including

digestive issues and fertility problems that may be related to improper nervous-system function.

While alternative therapies are often used in conjunction with conventional veterinary medicine, veterinary acupuncturists report success in treating cases of anestrus, cystic ovaries, uterine infections and retained placenta, which had not responded to conventional treatment.

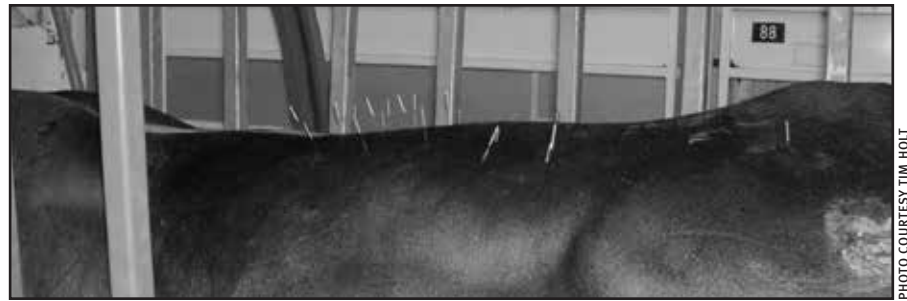


PHOTO COURTESY TIM HOLT

Colorado veterinarian Tim Holt says evidence is growing that alternative therapies can be effective in treating a wide variety of maladies in beef cattle, including digestive issues and fertility problems that may be related to improper nervous-system function.

Holt cites success in treating bull reproductive failure.

“We used both (chiropractic and acupuncture) on a 3-year-old bull weighing over 1,900 pounds. After manipulating his pelvis and applying acupuncture treatment, we saw improvement to both libido and semen quality,” says Holt.

Preventive measures

Holt says chiropractic adjustment and acupuncture treatments are increasingly applied as preventive measures. Schnell seconds that, calling it particularly true for performance horses used in high-level competition. Owners may have these animals “tuned up” two or three times per year to help keep animals performing near the peak of their abilities.

When used as therapy for injury or ailment, one session might suffice in certain cases, but several treatments are often required. There are instances where an animal does not respond to one or either of these alternative methods of treatment. What’s most gratifying, though, is a favorable response to chiropractic, acupuncture or a combination, when other conventional treatments have failed.

“Quite often, first-time clients are looking for something, almost anything, that might help. They’re willing to sort of ‘test the waters,’ ” says Schnell. “The first thing they need to understand is that neither of these therapies is meant to take the place of conventional veterinary medicine, but I think they are gaining acceptance and can complement traditional veterinary methods, especially for pain management. More veterinarians are seeing the benefits, and I do have more people call as a result of referrals by their regular veterinarians.”

Schnell and Holt warn against seeking treatment for animals from anyone other than a trained professional. There’s a reason why some states and Canadian provinces only allow licensed veterinarians to practice chiropractic or acupuncture. Trying to apply these methods without the knowledge and skills gained through formal training can cause serious harm to a patient.