

Equine Naturopathy & Muscle Therapies

Partnering with you in a wholistic approach to health, wellbeing and performance – enabling your horse to become the best it can be – naturally!



Equine Naturopathy – what is it?

Equine Naturopathy – I'm often asked "what is this?" So much so, that I have had the key components sign-written onto my vehicle and routinely included with advertising. My partner believes I would have been burned at the stake if I had lived in past centuries and a close friend lovingly calls me the 'horse witch-doctor'. This seems to sum it up for many, but it does encompass quite a bit more. Equine naturopathy provides a wholistic and tailored approach to improving health and wellbeing for our equine friends – I don't just spend all of my time boiling-up herbs in the cauldron!

The key components of equine naturopathy include a sound knowledge, understanding and application of: anatomy and physiology; myofunctional therapy (which many people refer to as massage or bodywork); pasture management; nutrition; herbal medicine; and manufacturing and dispensing of herbal medicine (not necessarily using a cauldron). Naturopathy also considers other influences on the horse, such as genetics, its workload and training regime, care and handling, equipment and tack, environment and companionship.

Naturopathy brings wholistic attention to the best possible options and therapies for the horse that considers all of the internal and external influences impacting its quality of life to support optimum bodily repair and recovery, health and wellbeing – striving for homeostasis – that is, to achieve and maintain a normal (or as normal as possible) internal stability or balance in all of its parts and systems.

Naturopathy can provide an alternative option to allopathic/veterinary medicine or it can provide a collaborative option in which the natural therapy can support a suitable veterinary treatment to achieve an improved outcome. However, in saying that, whichever option is taken, an accurate diagnosis is always sought from a Veterinarian to ensure appropriate treatment and to avoid any contraindications. Other practitioners may also be needed from time-to-time and often the best results come from a team approach – veterinarian, trimmer, dentist, trainer/instructor, owner/handler and naturopath working together towards a common goal.

Taking a closer look at those key components and the benefits of equine naturopathy:

Anatomy and Physiology – a comprehensive understanding of the equines structural components, movement and body systems are necessary to competently assess and wholistically manage any issues presenting in the horse. It also allows accurate and more meaningful dialogue between other practitioners that may be involved with treatment or management.

The basics begin with the terminology to allow description of specific locations on the equines body utilising universal language, such as: cranial, caudal, medial, lateral, superficial, deep, brachiocephalic, latissimus dorsi, carpus, femur, thoracic, and so on. It also considers conformation, hoof balance, motion

and biomechanics, gait analysis and exercise physiology. Then, an understanding of the body components and systems and how they all integrate – cells, tissues, skin and all of the body systems: skeletal, muscular, nervous, cardiovascular, respiratory, lymphatic, digestive, urinary, reproductive, endocrine – and how all of these work together to strive for homeostasis.

Equine Myofunctional Therapy (EMT/massage) – the power of touch through the application of various massage techniques to promote relaxation and to stimulate circulation of blood and lymph, which are necessary for reducing inflammation, removing waste products, promoting immune defences and supplying the nutrients needed for healing. EMT is also beneficial for the breakdown of adhesions and scar tissue. EMT may be utilised for therapeutic, sports (pre/post competition), maintenance or remedial applications. However, careful assessment and knowledge are needed to ensure that the powerful effects of EMT are not contraindicated by certain injuries or conditions.

Pasture Management – has an important role in the health, wellbeing and management of many Australian horses as a valuable source of nutrition and also a place to rest, play and exercise freely. Understanding the appropriateness of grass and pasture types for equines and for various climates and environmental conditions and understanding how pasture quality can be improved by avoiding common problems of over-grazing, parasite and weed infestations and soil compaction can contribute to improved equine health and overall savings in feed costs.

Nutrition – Hippocrates certainly had it right when he said “let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food”. Like all living creatures, horses need a correctly balanced diet with all of the appropriate nutrients in the appropriate quantities to maintain health and to perform well in their tasks. Sitting alongside dental care, hoof care and parasite management, getting pasture management and nutrition right would have to be the most fundamental and important aspects of equine care – if these things are poorly managed there will always be some level of health and/or behavioural problems.

Unfortunately Australian soils are generally lacking in many of the key nutrients to be able to support horses on grasses or pastures alone, and so, some form of nutritional balancing through supplementation is generally required. But this can vary from region to region and sometimes even between paddocks and even between horses – like us, horses have individual needs. So knowing what is required and how much is required takes some scientific knowledge to be done properly and safely. It's no good taking the old scatter-gun approach to try and cover all bases either – many nutrients, particularly minerals, have a symbiotic relationship and need to be in certain ratios, and some nutrients in excess can even be toxic! Then there is the plethora of bagged and processed feeds available in Australia – making sense of these and knowing which are truly healthful and which are no better than junk food is another challenge.

But achieving a balanced diet is a challenge well worth taking-up with a trained and independent nutritionist. Every horse owner that I have worked with from a nutritional perspective can hardly believe the improvements with their horse's overall health, condition and behaviour – I do believe Hippocrates was on to something!

Herbal Medicine – herbs perform a dual function of being foods as well as medicine, building health through nutritional properties and also aiding the healing process through medicinal action. And as herbs were once part of the equines natural grazing and browsing diet, horses accept and respond quite well to herbal medicine.

Plants have been used as safe and effective medicine for centuries and, over this time, a growing repository of credible and valuable knowledge has developed. In its past, plant or herbal medicine has

gone through belief stages of being mystical, witchery, quackery, or a hippy thing, but through its longevity and credibility, it is now emerging from allopathic medicine as a valid option to utilise in place of, or in conjunction with, the mainstream veterinary/health options.

Herbal medicine holds very powerful chemistry, with plant constituents of alkaloids, bitters, tannins, mucilage, saponins, glycosides and others, that can be therapeutic, but some can be dangerous, even deadly. For these reasons, it is imperative to have sound knowledge of the main constituents in plants we use as medicine, primarily for safety and effectiveness. Such knowledge is also important to be able to hold professional dialogue and relationships with other practitioners, and to be able to maintain and continue to grow the credibility and the professionalism for herbal medicine so it may take its rightful place, with peer and consumer acknowledgment, alongside allopathic options.

While herbal medicine is effective, in many cases, it is not necessarily the 'quick-fix' option of most reductionist, allopathic methods – it can take a little while to take effect and for results to be realised. However, because wholistic herbal medicine addresses the whole of the horse's wellbeing and the underlying causes of its dis-ease (not just the symptoms), the therapeutic effects are well sustained and occur with little or no side-effects. You need to consider also, that much dis-ease in horses has taken time, sometimes many years, to present and it would be unrealistic to expect this to be properly resolved in a short timeframe. As it takes around 12 weeks for the body to complete a full blood cycle and for cells to regenerate, then this is the sort of minimum timeframe that should be granted to realise benefit.

Now, in being so passionate about equine naturopathy, I'm not being close-minded to Vet's and other allopathic practitioners – advancements with modern approaches have brought some wonderful expertise, products, treatments and diagnostic benefits into the arena. And in many situations veterinary intervention is absolutely necessary. However, it's the general reductionist approach that bothers me – the focus seems more on the treatment of symptoms, and not so much on causal factors, often with a prescription of some sort of pharmaceutical product offered as the remedy – not much different to humans going to the doctor these days.

Of course, the reductionist approach and pharmaceutical product often brings a 'quick-fix' to the main symptoms, which is great initially, but often it comes with the cost of adverse side-effects and the underlying cause often remains only to re-emerge at a later time or in some other form.

"But modern medicine has evolved from plant-based medicine", I hear you say, and yes, this is fundamentally true, but, in my view, it has been adulterated along the way. Modern medicine is largely based on isolated plant constituents (ie: the active ingredient in the plant), rather than utilising the whole plant. In most instances, this isolated plant constituent has been synthetically reproduced in a laboratory, allowing for patents and greater commercial benefit for the pharmaceutical companies producing the synthetic version. Whereas, the whole plant provides the active ingredient, along with other co-constituents that provide balance and minimise side-effects and also provide support with nutritional benefits.

The increased commercial opportunities that synthetic isolate patents allow also seem to bring financial and political influences that are not always to the benefit of living creatures. It seems very common that one allopathic medicine now requires the support of another allopathic medicine to counteract a side-effect (and so on) and so the profits grow and overall health declines. And like many others, I do wonder if this has generated a sickness industry rather than supporting a health industry...

A debate for another time, perhaps, but if politics and profits could be taken out of the equation, there is huge potential for improved health outcomes if traditional natural therapies and modern medicine could truly collaborate to utilise the best of both worlds.

Manufacturing and Dispensing of Herbal Medicine – quality control, effectiveness, cost, supply and individual customisation are just some of the reasons why manufacturing and dispensing herbal medicine is a preferred option. These medicines can be provided in many forms for internal use, such as: infusions, inhalations, decoctions, tinctures, etc and for external use, such as: creams, ointments, salves, poultices, liniments, etc. These medicines can have the advantage of utilising the active constituents and the whole plant to include both medicinal and nutritional benefits with minimal or no side-effects.

Medicine in liquid form is the most readily absorbed by the body; but for external use, the medicine often needs to be held over the affected area in some sort of a base, such as an ointment, so that it can be absorbed into a more localised area. Herbal medicine can be quite powerful, some herbs are even toxic, and so this requires a thorough knowledge of herbs, herb combinations, contraindications and the most appropriate processing methods to provide safety and efficacy with prescribing and dispensing.

So in a nutshell, that's Equine Naturopathy from my perspective. From a wholistic stance, my preference is for natural therapies wherever this is appropriate, but I am balanced enough to realise that being wholistic means being able to work with an appropriate allopathic treatment from time-to-time – wholistic and complementary! Natural therapies do not have all of the answers all of the time and neither does allopathic. For me, it's about the utilising the best and most appropriate option, or combination of options, for the situation.

However, it doesn't always work the other way. Many people, including other practitioners seem very close-minded towards naturopathy and often dismiss it as 'witch-doctoring', but I don't really understand why such a barrier exists. If you give it a bit of thought, it's not too difficult to realise that natural therapies, including plant-based medicines, have kept living creatures going since the dawn of time. Allopathic/veterinary medicines have really only come onto the scene in the last few hundred years. But both have much to offer – if these two worlds could truly collaborate, I believe we would have far superior outcomes.

Naturopathy is my chosen field simply because this encompasses nature's provisions that have safely and effectively supported the existence and wellbeing of living creatures for centuries. Herbs and plants, including vegetables, provide us with superior medicine through specific applications that support vital processes of the body and biochemical interactions that utilise herb constituents that work in a synergistic way with the whole body to aid self-healing and homeostasis. Herbs and plants, through their nutritional properties and various constituents, are key in maintaining health and preventing dis-ease, so much as they are important as remedies and medicine. The growing resurgence and interest in natural therapies is an indication that I'm not alone in this thinking.

References

- Bunney, S 1985, *The Illustrated Book of Herbs: their medicinal and culinary uses*, Gallery Books, New York.
- Dagge, J 2002, *The Natural Alternative*, Canberra Times, viewed 1 October 2016, www.canberratimes.com.au .
- Hoffman, D 2003, *Medical Herbalism: the science and practice of herbal medicine*, Healing Arts Press, Rochester, Vermont.

- Kohnke, J, Kelleher, F & Trevor-Jones, P, 1999, *Feeding Horses in Australia*, Rural Industries Research and development Corporation, Union Offset, Canberra, ACT.
- Layton, C 2017, *Equine Nutrition*, seminar booklet and notes, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW.
- Myers, J 2008, *Certificate in Equine Nutrition*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Reductionist / Wholistic Discussion* 2011, CD-ROM, National College of Traditional Medicine, Sunshine, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 1997, *Fruit & Vegetables as Medicine*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Sunshine, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2005, *Certificate in Pasture Management*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2007, *Manufacturing and Dispensing Herbal Medicine*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2008, *Certificate in Equine Anatomy & Physiology*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2008, *Certificate in Equine Myofunctional Therapy, Volume 1*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2008, *Certificate in Equine Myofunctional Therapy, Volume 2*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2008, *Certificate in Equine Nutrition*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2012, *Certificate in Herbal Medicine for Horses*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Rogers, S 2016, *Clinical Principles Equine Naturopathy Diploma*, National College of Traditional Medicine, Wendouree Village, Victoria.
- Van den Berg, M 2017, *Sustainable Horse Keeping & Pasture Management*, seminar booklet and notes, Springhurst and Byawatha Hills Landcare Group, Tarrawingee, Vic.
- Wynn, S, & Fougere, B 2007, *Veterinary Herbal Medicine*, Mosby Elsevier, USA.