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Advancing evidence based practices and learning in equitation

Encouraging a questioning, evidence based approach to horse training and management

Prof Natalie Waran of the University of Edinburgh and Dr Hayley Randle of Duchy College, UK co-presented the plenary talk, 'Advancing evidence based practice and learning in equitation' at the 2013 ISES conference in Delaware, USA.

Much of what is done with horses is based on traditional methods, opinion, or even current fashion, but according to Waran, "Just because these methods work, doesn't mean they are necessarily right". Applying an evidence based approach to horse management, training, and performance may help to eliminate practices that have a detrimental effect on the horse's health, welfare, and therefore sustainability.

Due in part to equestrian events such as the 2012 Olympics generating excitement, an increasing number of people are interested in riding and owning horses. "There are many physical and psychological benefits associated with horse riding" says Waran, but cautions that there is also a darker side, referring to injuries that can occur both whilst riding and during general handling. Waran says, "When looking at the reasons why these sorts of accidents happen, riders, owners, trainers, will often

report that 70% of these accidents are due to behaviour and training of the horse rather than due to their own competence”.

Waran suggests that a shift in thinking may help reduce the incidence of accidents, so ensuring horse and rider safety. Historically, horse people have focussed on ways to protect themselves during accidents, rather than addressing whether horses are ‘fit for purpose’ – in other words, horses properly prepared to do the jobs required of them. “We wouldn’t put new drivers into a car with unsound steering and unreliable brakes, and yet we frequently see horses that may lack appropriate training of the basic stop and go aids being ridden by inexperienced riders” says Waran.

A 2008 Australian survey found riders, owners, and trainers have increasing concerns over welfare issues. Such issues included: the use of drugs to modify the behaviour of horses; the use of unconventional and questionable methods to control horse behaviour e.g. walking horses 10-12 hours straight or withholding water for 24 hours to prevent misbehaviour before showing; and using severe aggression or dominance mind sets to manage behaviour. Thinking of how to change current behaviour towards horses, and their management and training, Waran recommended adopting approaches used in similar situations, such as animal welfare science. Human behaviour can change when attitudes change, and this may be seen through responding to concerns about horse welfare.

Waran proposed that an evidence based approach may help eliminate unsafe or risky practices. The mutually shared desire of wanting what is best for the horse may encourage horse professionals to use the best available evidence to decide how they will achieve their training and management goals. Such an approach may also

help challenge fashions or fads in horse training, such as the use of equipment that comes with no proof of efficacy, only subjective personal endorsement.

In summary, Waran challenged all horse owners and riders to consider how they place the welfare of the horse before any other motivation or goal, and therefore how equitation can be 'future proofed' for a sustainable industry. She suggested that the answer lies in encouraging a more questioning approach to equitation. Her co-presenter Randle, added "you can only manage what you can measure", asserting that there is a need for the horse industry to focus on ways to measure and record inputs related to the rider and/or equipment as well as the horses' responses.

Randle explained some of the evidence based tools currently available, such as: rein tension, saddle, poll, and noseband pressure measuring devices. She also touched on the ability to assess methodologies and environments for training, as well as the increasing scientific focus on the rider's position, his/her physical effect on the horse, and how coaching the rider's psychological state also impact on the horse.

Randle spoke of the exciting developments in equitation science research, and ISES' increasing contribution to such research. "The great thing about science is that every time you get an answer, or appear to be getting an answer...you find that you have generated a multitude of other questions". Randle suggested the outcomes of equitation science research can lead to the development of a more easily understood shared language between coach and rider, which could help to eliminate horse welfare issues both in hand and under saddle.

Randle felt that the uptake of information by those outside of academia, will increase in the future as equitation science develops and becomes more widely recognised and accepted as a science. She noted that there are increasing opportunities for horse people to learn more through enrolling in courses at all levels, from post school to PhD Equitation Science programs.

Randle concluded by saying, “Education underpinned by rigorous objective evidence is essential. This is how equitation will be future proofed and both horse and rider welfare safeguarded”.

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The International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to facilitate research into the training of horses to enhance horse welfare and improve the horse-rider relationship. www.equitationscience.com

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