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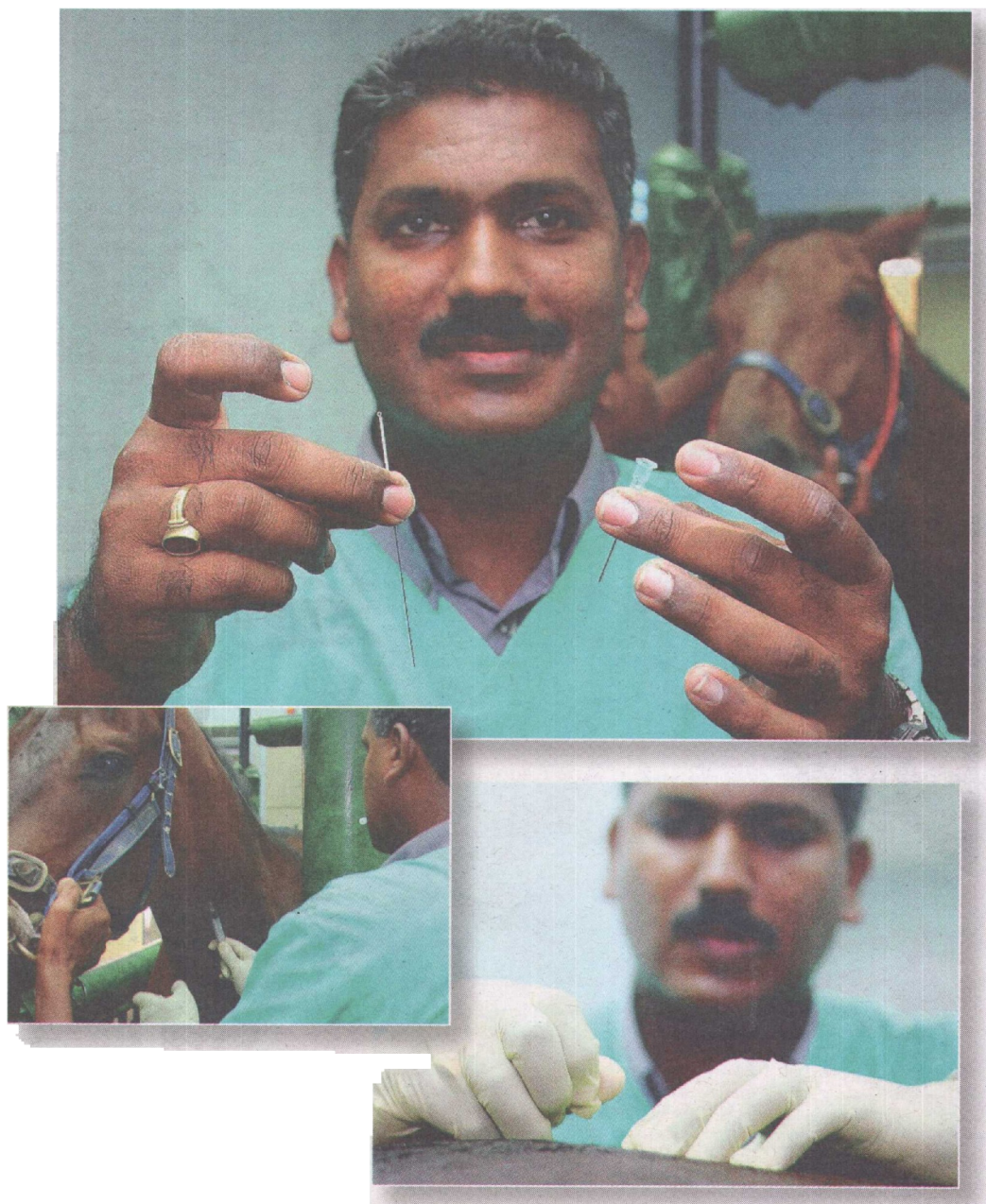
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Pin-cushioned ponies

Acupuncture has been gaining popularity all over the world but lately, it has also been used on horses.

REVATHI
MURUGAPPAN



Clockwise from top: Selangor Turf Club senior veterinary surgeon Dr Shri Kanth showing the kinds of needles he uses; treating a horse.

Selangor Turf Club's (STC) senior veterinary surgeon Dr Shri Kanth puts on his surgical gloves, gives a nod and the next race horse is brought into the clinic.

He swabs alcohol along the horse's spine, tears open a pack of disposable needles and swiftly inserts a few at various points on the spine. The sedated horse lets out a soft neigh and puts his head on his groom, who affectionately strokes the animal's head.

In between the acupuncture treatment, Dr Shri also tests a young intern on the various muscles along the horse's shoulder.

His cell phone rings. Then, another visiting vet barges in to say a treatment isn't working and that the horse is writhing in pain. Worse yet, the wiremen are doing some drilling today so it's noisy. Outside, more horses are waiting to be seen.

Dr Shri is indeed a busy man. I wonder how I'm to conduct the interview with the equine acupuncturist.

Reading my mind, Dr Shri apologises and says, "We run a busy practice here so sorry for all the interruptions. It's like this everyday. I have to talk to you as I work... or multitask, as you can see!"

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in using acupuncture in veterinary medicine, especially as treatment for athletic horses with sore backs and poor performance, says Dr Shri. He is one of the few equine vets in the country to use this treatment to complement conventional medicine.

He quickly adds, "I'm a vet first so I was trained in medical science. Usually, I use Western methods to diagnose the problem. If I feel western medicine won't work, then I use acupuncture as a last resort or I complement it with modern medicine. By combining both therapies, the results are about 10% better."

The needles used in equine acupuncture are the same ones used on humans. The longer the needle, the more strength it has but the more painful it is for the horse. Needles have to be inserted speedily or the horse might have a reflex action and kick the vet.

Dr Shri's assistant got kicked once and suffered a fractured hand. Needles are left in for a few minutes, then removed just as rapidly.

While the relief is faster in Western medicine, Dr Shri says the acupuncture appears to give pain relief to muscle soreness and helps horses recover better from the physical and mental anguish of racing and training. But, the practice is not without controversy.

"Acupuncture can stimulate endorphins and

make the horse run its fastest. Some consider it an unnatural way to enhance performance," says Dr Shri.

For this reason, he is strict about the timing of the treatment. Horses must be brought in no less than five days prior to a race.

Ironically, the better the horses perform on racing day, chances are the more problems they might develop as they've been working too hard, he says. All horses are tested for steroids pre- and post-race.

Dr Shri also recommends that horses go through a detoxification programme using homeopathic medicine before sending them to a stable in Genting Highlands to "relax". Sadly, the horses sometimes only get a holiday once in two years because there simply aren't enough pastures around.

He says, "The horses are put under a lot of stress so if I feel a horse has had its run, I recommend to the trainer that it needs to recuperate."

The rehabilitation spell can last anywhere from a month to six months.

We've been talking for the past three hours

and Dr Shri hasn't had a moment of rest. Every few minutes, someone runs up to ask something. He's a wealth of information and obviously, an experienced veterinarian though he's only 34.

Horses are his passion and at 12, he was already doing voluntary work at the Perak Turf Club, learning all he could about the majestic animal.

After finishing school, and much to his dismay, he was offered a place to study engineering at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. A year later, he applied to study veterinary medicine at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (now Universiti Putra Malaysia) and was accepted. Over the years, he added more certifications to his résumé, equine acupuncture being one of

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(Above) Dr Shri Kanth performing aquapuncture on a patient.

them.

"I consider this a blue-collar job. I don't work in an office setting. Here, there's a lot of dirt and while it's not a pleasant working environment, it's a noble profession nevertheless," says Dr Shri who has been with the STC since 1998.

The job comes with perils as one can never predict how animals might react when in pain. Three years ago, he went to inspect a horse with abdominal pain. It had been quarantined and was on the floor groaning.

Suddenly, the animal used its front legs to kick the vet on his forehead. Caught unaware, Dr Shri fell and the horse stepped on him mercilessly. He broke some ribs, a collar bone, sustained various injuries and was hospitalised for a week.

He recalls, "It was unforgettable. But, that's the unpredictability of my job."

Just then, a horse is brought in and Dr Shri points out the horse has a tight hamstring and lower back problem. The ribs stick out on one side.

"Back problems are mostly rider-induced; bad riders create bad backs. If the rider has a problem on one side of his back, he will shift his weight to his stronger side and, as a result, the horse is forced to use one side more than the other," explains Dr Shri.

An improper saddle fit contributes to the problem. The rider might be comfortable with the saddle but the horse may not be, he says.

However, the best fit is obtained through trial and error. He shows me a horse with chronic saddle soreness and its middle part caving in. For this horse, the vet uses acupuncture (see top sidebar) treatment — he injects homeopathic medicine along the sides of the spine to desensitise the nerves to reduce the inflammation.

"This is a very painful process. But the horse is comfortable afterwards," he says, adding that he does 50 to 60 acupuncture sessions monthly.

Racing rules require all race horses to be stabled within the vicinity of the Turf Club and there are 600-odd race horses here. Another 25 of the Agong's endurance horses are also housed at the STC. I am told Dr Shri is responsible for their well-being, although he is tight-lipped.

Many horses are referred here for diagnosis as it's the sole equine hospital in the Klang Valley. With four vets, one intern and four vet assistants at the STC, Dr Shri and his team are constantly attending to their "patients".

Occasionally, he takes a walk around the stables to gaze at the beautiful creatures. If there's a horse that's convulsing, Dr Shri examines the horse and if necessary, puts it down immediately without consulting its trainer.

He argues, "I have the right to do it. I must do what is humane as the welfare of the horses cannot be compromised. I consider myself their guardian and don't mind going to court to fight my case."

Likewise, if a horse is badly fractured or diseased and has no hope of recovery, Dr Shri is forced to put it down as a last resort. Yes, he has a licence to kill but he dreads the moment.

"When that happens, it is a very sad day for me," he says, eyes softening.

Once race horses are over their racing peak (from 2-6 years), some are sent to be retrained for other equestrian sports or given to selected farms. At least the mares stand a chance of breeding but for the gelded male horses, their life is literally over.

As Dr Shri says, horse racing is not an investment, but an indulgence.

He may be their guardian but Dr Shri has never ridden a race horse. He doesn't own one either, but rides for pleasure when time permits and usually it's once a month at most.

"I'm not fit enough to get onto a race horse. Plus, I'm too heavy!" he says, grinning.

There can be several owners of one horse and one trainer for several horses. However, trainers, not owners, determine when to send the horse for acupuncture treatment. And usually, it's for cases of bad backs.

Selangor Turf Club trainer Malcolm Thwaites, 63, trains 40-odd horses and sends around five of them for a round of acupuncture before a race to alleviate pain.

"If the horse has gone for a few sessions and there is no improvement, then the underlying ailment is quite severe. In such cases, I send the horse back to rest for a month before resuming training."

Every trainer has a different strategy, says Thwaites, who races each horse 10 to 12 times a year. Fellow horse trainer Prakash Pereira, 57, lets his horses rest for 21 days before racing them again.

Being a professional trainer who handles 20 horses, Pereira can immediately detect if a horse is in pain and whether it is a minor or major injury.

Horse watch

"Initially, we give them a hot water treatment, then massages and if that doesn't work, we send them for acupuncture. Horses can only win if they have no pain. They have no voice so we try to help them. Horse racing is an extremely pressurised game and these horses are under a lot of stress, so they have to recharge their batteries to race again," says Pereira.

"Dr Shri is in the profession for the love of it and I constantly ask him for advice. He sees the horses, feels them and knows exactly what treatment to recommend."

Of course, the horse owners foot the medical bill. Each acupuncture session costs around RM84.

Says Pereira, "They (owners) are typical businessmen and will grumble, 'Why so high?' But when the horse wins, all is forgotten."

Needled to health



(Above) Acupuncture needles have to be inserted swiftly so that the horse doesn't kick.
— VICTOR K. K. NG

Equine acupuncture treatments consist of inserting sterile needles at certain points on the body. These points are determined by the body's flow of energy or chi, which was discovered by the ancient Chinese.

"When the body is disturbed by injury, stress or disease, the flow of chi is disturbed but can be altered by stimulating certain anatomical points," says Dr Shri Kanth.

A routine acupuncture treatment includes insertion of fine needles at the points along the back and neck muscles, accompanied by treatment of various points on the lower legs.

"All horses tolerate fine needles well," he adds.

"The body releases different chemicals according to the placement of the needles. For example, if the horse is running awkwardly due to shoulder pain, correctly placed acupuncture needles can help release the blocked energy, as well as release painkilling hormones such as enkephalins and met-enkephalins into the central nervous system."

Acupuncture points can also be stimulated by injecting vitamins, saline or antibiotics under the skin — a procedure known as aquapuncture. For horses, these points usually run down either side of the spine. This treatment is believed to increase the potency of the treatment and increase the effects of the injected substance.

According to veterinary acupuncturist Dr Jenni Ahmat, acupuncture treatments also have a harmonising effect on the hormonal

system of horses that are cranky or nervous.

A survey conducted in the US revealed there was a lower level of lower leg injury and breakdown in stables once the horses were receiving regular acupuncture treatment. The trainers noted their horses were calmer, had improved appetites and exhibited less aggression whilst in training.

□ Equine acupuncture is recognised by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Equine Practitioners.

■ Source: <http://www.athletic-animals.com/acupuncture>