

Where there was a will, acupuncture found the way!

Acupuncture treatment for resolution of traumatic facial paralysis in a warmblood foal

The little colt was strong-willed and absolutely gorgeous. Bright chestnut with two high white socks, he was the spitting image of the most successful dressage horse in the barn. His owner, a top trainer and friend of mine, hoped that her new colt would someday fill those much larger horseshoes.

Fall had arrived, and the Hanoverian branding inspection was scheduled. Preparations were underway – bathing, grooming, clipping, braiding. But the little colt wasn't interested in being made beautiful that day, and reacted violently to being led away from his siblings. His owner would relive the moment again and again.

I answered the phone and heard a strong but shaking voice asking if I would come right away to see if there was anything I could do. "The vet's recommending that I put him down. Is there anything you can do, uh, with acupuncture? Can you use acupuncture in an emergency? Please help!" The little colt had reared up and slipped, losing his footing and toppling over backwards, crashing onto the left side of his head and neck on the hard-packed ground. When he recovered, it was obvious he had sustained major injuries.

As I walked into the stall, I saw a depressed little foal where brilliance and attitude once radiated. He was unable to bend to nurse from his dam, and his neck had a large, painful bulge up high by his skull on the left side. More significantly, his face was apparently asymmetrical. While the right side was completely normal, the left lip drooped, his ear flopped low, his nose was pulled to the right, and his left eyelids wouldn't close. He also struggled to breathe through his left nostril. This little colt had complete left-sided facial paralysis.

His owner informed me that radiographs had been taken, and no fractures were initially seen. I questioned this information as I heard a sickening bone-on-bone grinding and clunking emitted from the colt's neck every time he moved his head. I asked which images had been obtained, and requested repeats with a radiology consult. His owner looked at me pleadingly and asked if acupuncture might help her little colt, now just three months old.

Acupuncture is tremendously effective in treating both acute and chronic pain, and musculoskeletal trauma and disease. Acupuncture needles stimulate the body's endorphins (Mother Nature's morphine), regulate circulation, and modulate the nervous system and immunity. From an Eastern view, acupuncture needles also help the flow of Qi, (pronounced "Chee"), which is the body's life-force or energy. Any pain, swelling, trauma, chronic injury, etc. causes stagnation, or a blockage of this flow. However, the risks involved in working with a 12 week-old colt, unused to major handling or needles, with a likely high neck fracture, made me appropriately hesitate. I counseled the owner about a plan: breathe deeply, await the results of the new radiographs, and reassess.

As expected, the radiology report described a fracture of the left wing of the atlas, with a non-displaced fracture of the dens (the protuberance of the second neck bone that sits in the first). Spinal cord compression was apparent on plain radiographs, according to the report. A second veterinarian again suggested euthanasia due to quality of life concerns,

and the colt's apparent blindness. The colt was not responding to anti-inflammatories that had been given.

But the colt's owner was looking for options and wasn't ready to give up. I discussed with her the need for the fracture to be healed before we did any major work – any quick jerking or pulling reaction, pressure from a halter, or head-tossing, could be disastrous when dealing with a fracture over the spinal cord. I did a full neurological examination, and found that contrary to prior notation, the colt was NOT blind. He had an intact menace response and could retract his eyeball into the socket for protection, though he was unable to close his eyelids. This gave me clues about which nerves were affected. We used an artificial tears product to keep his eye lubricated, and he was bucket fed around the clock by dutiful working students who milked the mare. The colt seemed to rally initially, but then became more agitated and depressed.

At this time, roughly 3 weeks after his accident, his owner and I agreed to proceed with treatment, accepting that the benefit would outweigh the risks, but that we would wait until 6 weeks post-injury for very aggressive treatment. Tongue and pulse diagnosis confirmed our TCVM diagnosis: excess heat pattern with focal Qi and blood stagnation. The colt stood beautifully for his first few treatments. I chose local treatment points around the eyelids, nose, lip, atlas and neck, as well as “master” points for the head, face, and neck. Small ½” to 1” stainless steel needles were inserted carefully. For the first few treatments, only a few points were used, but as we proceeded, electroacupuncture was added to stimulate the nerves, decrease pain, and improve circulation. I was thrilled to see that I could artificially stimulate the eyelids to blink with electrical current, and the ear would twitch – evidence that there was SOME nervous system function present.

The colt was treated 1-2 times weekly for 4 weeks, each time regaining some function. To improve his quality of life, we provided access outside on green grass with his dam for much needed movement and sunlight. A flymask protected his eyes from insects and the bright sun. Then, after 6 treatments, 8 weeks post-injury, I watched twice in disbelief as he blinked on his own! And the next week he was able to breathe through an open left nostril and his ear stood up properly!

As his healing progressed, he was weaned from his dam and bucket, and turned out with his siblings. The largest obstacle we now encountered was a red, fleshy granuloma that formed in his mouth on his lower gingiva. As he was unable to use his lip correctly, his lower jaw would scrape across the ground, irritating the tissues and creating an angry, red, fleshy mass. I aggressively treated his lower left lip with electroacupuncture, but was still not getting the final resolution I'd hoped for. The colt was now 90% healed after 10 treatments, but needed a full recovery. Chinese herbal medicine was the final ingredient.

I contacted my acupuncture professor Dr. Huisheng Xie, of the Chi Institute of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine in Gainesville, Florida. He directed me to use Facial P™ and Bu Yang Huan Wu™ Chinese herbal medicine twice daily added to feed for 30 days. Within 7 short days of administration, the colt had complete, 100% function of his previously paralyzed face.

There is a minimal amount of research published on using electroacupuncture to treat muscle paralysis in human patients, and even less on cases of facial paralysis specifically. In a literature review I found one article about a dog successfully treated, and one equine case study. However, research agreed that resolution of signs was attained in an average of 11-13 treatments, which concurs with the 11 treatments our colt required for full

resolution. Prognosis in many veterinary textbooks for horses with facial paralysis is bleak, offering only “Tincture of Time” as a healing approach. Many references quoted that facial paralysis could resolve by itself in 1-10 days, but a poor prognosis was given for animals with dysfunction lasting longer than 2 weeks. One text cites, “There is no specific therapy for injury except massage and heat of denervated muscles for 15 min, BID-TID. The facial nerve can regenerate ~1-4 mm/day, so serial neurologic examinations can also help determine the prognosis. If there has been no improvement after 6 mo, the chance for recovery is poor. Horses with collapsing nostrils may require corrective surgery.” None of the Western veterinary texts cited acupuncture as a possible therapy for facial paralysis.

Acupuncture is often sought as a last resort treatment, but its success in reducing or eliminating pain, modifying circulation, and stimulating the nervous system supports its use as a primary therapy. Though I have treated countless horses with acupuncture, this case will always be my most inspirational. In the face of two veterinarians recommending euthanasia, and failure of Western medicine to provide either optimism or treatment, Traditional Chinese Acupuncture gave the owner both hope and a resolution, and her colt regained a chance at a full and successful life.