

AUSTRALIA'S BAREFOOT VET

by Ysabelle Dean



It takes a brave individual to fly in the face of tradition, but when Australian veterinarian Dr Alison Macintosh BVSc learned about Dr Strasser and her work, she felt she had to know more a whole lot more.

At around the same time Strasser was coming to the conclusion that shoeing and unnatural lifestyle were causing domestic horses serious harm, Alison just a kid at the time - saw her first case of laminitis in her own pony. She and her family had moved a few years previously from a large property in Central Queensland, to lush Brookfield, just outside Brisbane. Alison vividly recalls the drastic changes to the pony's feet over the two-year period before he developed the severe clinical signs of laminitis. Coincidentally (or not?), this was also the first horse Alison had ever had shod.

The Longreach property on which Alison spent her childhood was where her father had also grown up. There were 50-odd horses, many used for work on the property, and some working long days for a few weeks at a stretch. None were shod, and none that Alison can recall were ever lame. Alison's dad didn't see the need for shoes; felt it wasn't in the horses' best interests.



Those 50 horses rarely - if ever - needed trimming. Alison realises now that they were living in conditions considered by Strasser to be close to ideal for optimum health herd lifestyle in a large area, access to different types of terrain, no shoes, no rugs, no stables, natural, varied diet of plants and grasses.

Since graduating from vet school in 1988, Alison has attended countless vet and farrier conferences, and made every other possible attempt to educate herself about lameness, its causes and its cures. And yet, consistently successful treatment that could be guaranteed to do more than prolong the horse's usefulness to its owner for a few extra years remained elusive. Alison was also seeing across the board the same changes she noted in her pony's feet.

A few years ago, after travelling to the States for an Equine Sports Medicine conference, she connected with Dr Jeannie Waldron and had the opportunity to observe her experiments on heel strike injuries, through testing horses on treadmills. Dr Waldron concluded that the heavier the shoe, the worse the injury (with Natural Balance shoes the safest in this regard). For Alison, that work had much wider implications. She started to see a possible connection between shoeing and other detrimental changes to the horse's foot.

Another penny dropped in late 2001, when Alison read an article by Dr Strasser about foot damage caused by shoeing. She registered to attend a Strasser hoof trimming clinic, held in Melbourne in January 2002.

That clinic was an outstanding experience for Alison, not only in terms of content, but because it made her feel quite emotional at times. The pennies were now dropping thick and fast; cases - past and present - kept popping into her head, and she was suddenly seeing better ways to deal with them. Within one to two weeks of attending the clinic, Alison was applying what she had learned on some of her own patients. By May, she was treating several navicular and laminitis cases, some that could not be successfully addressed by conventional treatment. Within six months, she was trimming over 100 horses.

Those patients Alison has continued working with over a period of time have all made good progress. In some instances there has been an immediate positive response to removing the shoes and doing the initial "barefoot" trim. Some horses have taken a little longer, and some have tended to fall into a cycle of improvement and regression until healing starts to accelerate much as Strasser herself has experienced with her own case studies. Alison sees unnatural hoof form in every single patient - collapsed heels, elongated feet, collapsed/overlaid bars and general contraction. There is no longer any doubt in her mind of the significance of this in relationship to lameness and general health.



Although Alison accepts the validity of Strasser's all-or-nothing approach to lameness rehabilitation, she has found it productive to educate owners in bite-size bits. Her bottom line is that she will not treat a stabled/yarded horse because of the potential dangers associated with restoring circulation in a confined horse. Her patients must get enough movement on appropriate terrain, from daily exercise if necessary. Horses' feet must also be soaked for 20 minutes daily, either by having access to a dam into which they can walk, or by being made to stand in tubs of water.

Many of Alison's clients have been willing to look at Dr Strasser's theories and methods with an open mind, and to implement a more natural lifestyle for their horses. Veterinary colleagues are also, on the whole, keen to know more. However, Alison has met resistance from some farriers. She believes that this negativity comes from lack of information, coupled with the perception that their livelihood is threatened.

Alison believes that Strasser's own commitment to educating lay-people and professionals alike about the need for more horse-friendly husbandry practices is her greatest contribution to equine health and welfare, in keeping with the Five Freedoms quoted by John Webster in his book "Animal Welfare: A Cool Eye Towards Eden":

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition.
2. Freedom from discomfort.
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease.
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour.
5. Freedom from fear and distress.

The more Alison sees results with barefoot trimming, the more strongly she feels that she could never, in all conscience, shoe any horse ever again.