

# THERE'S THE RUB



A LITTLE KNOWN TECHNIQUE FROM  
DOWN UNDER IS **RUBBING** ITS  
WAY INTO HORSE HEALTH CIRCLES.

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

"It's like starting a ball rolling down a hill. Once you actually get it rolling you don't have to help it anymore."

Cheryl Gibson

When Debra Ann Derbyshire came across a Standardbred diagnosed with a non-specific neurological problem, she was convinced she could help. The horse, nearly unable to move, did not respond to conventional treatment. In a last ditch attempt its owners turned to Derbyshire to try a relatively unknown energy healing technique called Bowen. "They were skeptical at first because it didn't look like I was really doing anything," says Derbyshire, a naturopathic doctor and Bowen therapist in Waterloo, Ontario. "Within a week he had two treatments and was doing better." Three weeks and four treatments later, the horse was jogging a training mile in a respectable two minutes and 15 seconds.

Developed by industrial engineer Thomas Bowen, the Bowen technique came into existence more than 40 years ago in Australia. Today, his system is taught and practiced in 30 countries. In Canada, Cheryl Gibson and her teaching partner Simone Tod, working with Jonathan Damonte of Bowen Canada, a group of practitioners who work on humans,

recently created a professional equine Bowen certification teaching program known as Equi-Bow Canada. If they're on a mission, it is to spread the good word about this non-invasive therapy.

#### THE TECHNIQUE

The Bowen Technique uses the fingers, thumb, and palms in a rolling action over specific muscles, tendons, and ligaments "to build up energy and tension in the muscle and then move through it, sending a signal down the muscle," says Gibson. Most of the Bowen bodywork is concentrated on connective tissue known as fascia, a continuous membrane-like tissue that interpenetrates and surrounds every organ, blood vessel, nerve, muscle, and bone throughout the body. In prime condition, fascia is loose, moist, mobile, and elastic, facilitating movement between the parts of, and flow of bodily fluids throughout, the body.

"Though a series of gentle cross-fibre moves, Bowen treatment releases 'gluing' in the fascia, allowing the tissue to become more moveable," claims Gibson. "As the

fascia improves through better hydration, the body is able to provide a better supply of nutrients to the cells and remove waste. There is less restriction on muscles, tendons, and ligaments therefore the vascular, lymphatic, and nervous systems function more effectively."

Though there is some overlap with energy point meridians, Bowen is unlike other natural therapies in that it is completely non-invasive. It doesn't use needles (acupuncture), machinery (ultrasound), or even strong strokes (massage).

"The moves are like plucking a violin, where you send a vibration down the string. We make moves that challenge and build up energy behind a muscle bundle, or an area over another structure, then move through it. Then you go away and let the body process that for a few minutes," says Gibson.

Processing can sometimes go on for 15 to 20 minutes. "You leave the horse alone during that time. Horses are very good at telling you when to come back with their body language," she says, noting that the horse will often turn and look at, or come back to, the practitioner if he's loose in a stall or arena.

Treatment typically lasts an hour and can be safely applied to both acute and chronic injuries. "You should have a fresh injury checked by a vet, but you also want Bowen done as soon as possible. It's so gentle and non-invasive it does not disturb the tissue," says Gibson. Benefits are usually apparent within a few sessions, and often times after only one, she adds, even when long-standing conditions are being treated.

"You usually do three treatments in a row, a week apart. Then you reassess. It's like starting a ball rolling down a hill. Once you actually get it rolling you don't have to help it anymore. When it stops and is stuck, then you do a little more and off it goes again."

While Bowen is overwhelmingly safe, Gibson says, it should not be mixed with other physical therapies as they could



Photo by Cheryl Gibson

Bowen practitioners uses their hands to send a subtle signal to the body.

## Flaw of a few words

change or interrupt the message. "You need to give some time for the Bowen to work. During a session the practitioner is sending a subtle signal, which works in the body for the next five to seven days. Some things may change dramatically in a short time and some take longer. It is important to allow that subtle signal time to be assimilated by the brain and body in order to make a lasting change without the influence of another signal." An ice pack, for instance, would send a stronger message to the brain and overpower the message of the Bowen.

Cost per treatment varies by region. "One lady in the States I talked with charges \$125. Here in Canada, a treatment seems to range between \$85 and \$100. If there are several horses to do at once, the cost is cut down, but every practitioner has their own price range," says Gibson.

### INDICATIONS

Bowen is indicated for pain, inflammation, muscle tension, digestive disorders,



Photo by Cheryl Gibson

Gentle and non-invasive, Bowen can be used on acute and chronic injuries.

respiratory issues, and stress, and can also be used for non-specific problems like lethargy, says Derbyshire. "It's not like chiropractic work that only moves the bones. Because Bowen works with the brain, it addresses all systems of the body."

According to Gibson, Bowen is so successful it can reduce inflammation and pain very quickly, and a serious injury could be masked. "We stress having veterinary

attention and diagnosis. You want to make sure that things like bone chips or fractures are recognized and that a vet has opportunity to oversee the healing. Bowen practitioners never diagnose. It is important that vets know this so they can feel comfortable working with a Bowen practitioner, and also feel confident in recommending it. This can be a win-win situation," says Gibson.

It is generally accepted by Bowen practitioners that the technique works primarily through the nervous system, which has a sympathetic state (the fright/flight mode) and a parasympathetic state (the rest and digest mode).

"The blood goes to your muscles when you need to run, and goes to your stomach when you are relaxed," explains Derbyshire. "Your body can't be in both states at once; it is wired to be in one or the other. When the horse or human is stressed, these few moves put the body into the relaxed state, and address the condition you are treating, such as a sore foot or back."

Burlington, Ontario-based Linda Agnew, a graduate of the Equi-Bow Canada course, has used the technique on horses with specific complaints, including colic, soft tissue injuries, and even a broken pelvis, as well as on undiagnosed conditions.

One memorable case was a horse that was kicked in the elbow. "He'd been kicked a couple days before I saw him. The owner



Photo by Cheryl Gibson

A pony with a tendency to stand "camped under" before and after Bowen treatment.

## "How different is this than brushing or rubbing the horse with a towel?"

Dr. David Ramey

consulted her vet, who told her there was not much they could do. I happened to be there, treating a horse with a broken pelvis, and she asked me to have a look at the elbow. It was very hard and looked terrible. I did some Bowen moves around it, and then finished the other horse. I got an e-mail from the owner that night. She'd gone back out an hour later to put a wash on the elbow, which is what the vet had suggested trying, and when she looked at it the swelling was gone," says Agnew.

### The Birth of Equi-Bow Canada

For Cheryl Gibson of Equi-Bow Canada discovering Bowen therapy was a godsend. "There are times in my life when I find myself screaming to the heavens that I must have an answer to something, and I find that the answer will often fall into my lap. This was one of those times."

Upon learning about the technique from a client, she made an appointment to see a human practitioner, Dr. Manon Bolliger, some two hours away. The visit, she says, was well worth the drive. "The first session changed things in my body so much that I was almost jumping off the table. I was very excited," says Gibson.

Almost immediately she started making plans to incorporate the therapy into her holistic equine practice. "I had several big warmbloods that were not cooperative for CranioSacral therapy [a technique that applies subtle movement of the spinal and cranial bones to bring the central nervous system into harmony]; I needed something else for these horses so I wouldn't have to be in such contact with these big bodies thrashing around. I was needing more therapy than they did! So I knew exactly how I wanted to use this technique on those horses."

She and Simone Tod took Bowen training with Jonathan Damonte at Bowen Canada. "We started adapting human Bowen to horses. As we talked to Jonathan about our work, he asked if we'd be willing to develop and teach a certified horse course. We've been working on that for the past five years and now have a textbook and course available. Equi-Bow also offers a five-day horse owner's course; people can learn basic Bowen for humans and horses, and then work with their own families and animals," says Gibson.

The Equi-Bow course covers horses and humans, as well as tack fit and properly balanced feet. "We can't cover everything in our course, but we try to make it as broadly based as possible—so that when our practitioners graduate they are aware of the other factors that affect the horse. It's all inter-related. Working with an Equi-Bow practitioner becomes an education program for the owners as well, so they understand more what's going on, and how to help the horse." Find out more at [www.equi-bowcanada.com](http://www.equi-bowcanada.com)

### A CONTRARY POINT OF VIEW

David W. Ramey, a vet near Los Angeles, California, has been evaluating alternative therapies for many years and has written several books, including *A Consumer's Guide to Alternative Therapies in the Horse* and *Complementary and Alternative Medicine Considered*. Like many in the veterinary community, he is skeptical of Bowen therapy.

"Bowen is just one of an almost infinite variety of hands-on therapies. People have been laying hands on bodies for a long time. What seems to be consistent is that people keep coming up with different spins on it," says Dr. Ramey. "For instance, in chiropractic therapy, bones are out of place in the spine and you must push them back. With Bowen therapy the idea is that you are restoring energy or vibrational forces. But it's very difficult to determine what is being done."

While he doesn't dismiss that the technique may have some value, he questions its legitimacy as a healing tool. "There is certainly nothing wrong with rubbing your hands over a horse. It won't hurt the horse in any way and many horses like to be rubbed. But when you layer that with other claims such as 'we're restoring the flow of energy in the horse's body,' this relatively simple, non-invasive, very innocuous sort of thing becomes obscured by promotional nonsense," he says.

"Bottom line, if you are putting your hands on the horse and rubbing it, the horse will probably like it, it may relax the horse, and you may see some results you like," says Dr. Ramey.

"But how different is this than brushing or rubbing the horse with a towel? It's difficult, however, to build a career on carrying a towel around to rub horses, so that's why practitioners must layer these other things into it to make it appear special. Once you get the special, magical, mystical element going, people are curious and awed by it, and see things in it they want to see."

He continues, "In real medicine, if the horse has a problem or a need, there are certain things you can do to address that problem or need. There may be a side effect from a particular drug or treatment, but if something is going to have an effect it may also have a side effect."

He compares the potential harm of drugs, injections, and medical treatments to that of using a car. "Yes, you could be killed when driving a car. Thousands of people are killed every year in auto accidents, but that's not the important fact," he says. A reasonable risk/benefit assessment finds that most cars are safe, and so are most of the medical interventions we use in horses, he says.

"The fallacy that underlies alternative therapies is that people think they have found wonderful treatments that won't hurt your horse and only bring benefits. Everyone would love to have something like that. But in medicine, treatments that are only benign and beneficial and totally free of side effects do not exist. To really help real problems you usually need something concrete,

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Cheryl Gibson

sometimes even invasive. The body is very aggressive itself in counteracting biological processes—to fight off disease or heal a serious injury—but sometimes it needs some help. And that is what medicine is there to do," he says.

#### THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING

The chief argument against complementary therapies like Bowen is the preponderance of anecdotal, as opposed to scientific, evidence supporting their claims.

"Anecdote is a good starting point for studies and investigation," says Dr. Ramey. "But one problem with this sort of thing is that the claims far exceed any investigation. If you were going to spend money to buy something, you'd want to see that it does what it is supposed to do. You wouldn't buy a car from someone who claims it gets 70 miles to the gallon without trying it out. In medicine, people make anecdotal claims and say wonderful things about their therapy in the absence of any evidence, yet people don't seem to want to hold healing to the same standards and criteria they would when buying a car, a watch, or anything else."

In terms of Bowen specifically, he says evidence is not only lacking but improbable. "With Bowen therapy, when they talk about vibrational energies that produce nerve signals, this is nonsense. Science is very good at detecting energy; there are ways to detect things as minute as spins on electrons," says Dr. Ramey.

"But no healing energy has ever been determined by any method. The practitioners are basically saying they can determine where something that is not measurable is located, and can also tell you when that immeasurable thing has been fixed. If you want to buy into that kind of thinking, you can buy into anything—psychic communication with horses, or feeling the Z rays emanating from their joints, or whatever," he says.

Not all in the scientific community share Dr. Ramey's opinion. Currently, the Bowen Technique is being investigated by scientists in Europe and North America. The first approved human study using strict methodology is now complete and has been accepted for presentation at the First International Fascia Research Congress in Boston in October 2007. Conducted by Michelle Marr, senior lecturer at Coventry University in the UK and Julian Baker, principal instructor of The European College of Bowen Studies, the study examines the effect of the Bowen Technique on hamstring flexibility in asymptomatic individuals.

Gibson hopes research like this will pave the way for veterinary recognition of the little known therapy, but recognizes that

more study is needed. "We'd like more vets on board. Vets and doctors are more inclined to take something seriously if there have been studies that show in scientific terms that it works. Equi-Bow Canada is very interested in joining with veterinarians to study the effects of Bowen, and would encourage any that are interested to contact us," she says.

She adds, however, that the current dearth of research is not evidence that the technique is ineffective "Thirty years ago when I was working to develop natural therapies that would help horses, I could find very few people to brainstorm with. Now, there's more interest and many techniques to use. Some things I was doing back then were very intuitive, and we only had anecdotal results to share; now, more has been proven by science. This is great, but I would have lost 30 years of using these techniques if I'd waited for scientific data."

Whether Bowen therapy is 'faddish and trendy' as Dr. Ramey contends or a legitimate healing tool as its practitioners maintain remains to be seen. Until then, the two camps of believers and non-believers will be divided along a line in the sand one deems non-invasive and the other, nonsense. ✦

## Equi-Bow Canada



*Providing, Promoting And Encouraging  
Excellence In Equine Care.*

**EQUI-BOW  
CANADA**

### Equine Bowen Certificate Program

Sept. 22-23 (human) • Sept. 28-30 (horse)

This unit forms the foundation of the Equi-Bow certificate program. In this introduction to bowen, you will learn the basic bowen techniques and how they are applied to humans and horses. This unit is also offered as the **Horse Owner's Course** for those who wish to learn these techniques for their own personal use but do not wish to pursue bowen in a professional capacity.

The program will be held at Cedar Lane Farm,  
Puslinch, Ontario.

For more information or to arrange a demo  
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