The Impact of Bitted and Bitless Bridles on the Therapeutic Riding Horse

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Introduction
The wearing of bitted bridles for therapeutic horses is still commonplace in many riding centres. Despite the widespread use of bits, research shows how they can be a potential source of significant discomfort and pain (McLean et al., 2005), dental damage (Cook, 2011), injury (Jahiel, 2001) and numerous behavioural difficulties (Cook et al., 2003). Little research has been carried out on the effect of bitted and bitless bridles on the therapeutic riding horse.

This study aimed to explore whether horses wearing bitted bridles during riding lessons will show an increase in negative behaviors and whether horses wearing bitless bridles during riding lessons will show a reduction in negative behaviors and an increase in positive behaviors.

Materials and Methods
• Quantitative study
• 16 horses age 8-22
• 1 control group (8 horses)
• 1 study group (8 horses)
• 64 therapeutic riding sessions carried out (32 control; 32 study)
• Each therapeutic riding session was videoed
• Video analysis of sessions
• Developed a behaviour profiling ethogram - amalgamating Cooks’ (2013) research and preliminary pilot studies carried out at Festina Lente (Carey, 2014 [unpublished study])
• Ridden in Micklem multipurpose bridles, bitted and bitless
• Snaffle bits

Results

Negative Expression

Aversive Behaviour

Oral Distress

Positive Behaviour Study Horses vs. Control Horses

Relaxed positive behaviours included behaviours such as licking and chewing, eyes half closed, blowing out, lowering head – long and low and level headed. The result of the Mann Whitney u analysis shows that there was a statistically significant difference in positive behaviour between the control horses with bitted bridles and the study horses in bitted bridles.

Conclusions
The wearing of bitted bridles and changing from bitted to bitless bridles causes a significant increase in negative expressions, aversive and oral distress behaviours. This correlates with previous research which shows horses wearing bitted bridles display higher rates of negative behaviours than those wearing bitless bridles (Cook, 2003, 2007a). Subsequently the wearing of a bitless bridle showed the horses in the study displaying higher rates of positive behaviours.

Recommendations for further research
Following on from this study it is suggested that bitted bridles are unnecessary in therapeutic riding sessions. Many of the negative behaviours witnessed during the study not only compromise the welfare of the horse but may also compromise the therapeutic riding session itself, though further research in this area is necessary. The welfare of the therapeutic riding horse is of paramount importance at Festina Lente and for this reason we endeavour to ensure all the horses in our care have access to all of the five freedoms, in this case as it applies to freedom from pain. As the bit can be a source of pain and injury for the horse it is our recommendation that it is an unnecessary piece of equipment that violates the freedom of the horse.

Literature cited
Jahiel, J, 2001, What is this bitless bridle? Article published online at www.bitlessbridle.com

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