The day-to-day management of UK leisure horses and the prevalence of owner-reported stable-related and handling behaviour problems

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Abstract

While concerns regarding the day-to-day management of domestic horses have been raised in relation to behaviour problems and welfare, most published studies have focused on the management of performance horses and less is known about the routine management of leisure horses and the prevalence of behavioural problems within this population. The objective of this study was to generate data on the day-to-day management of UK leisure horses and to quantify the prevalence of stable/stall-related and handling behaviour problems. A self-administered internet survey was used to collect individual horse-level data from a convenience sample of leisure horse owners. The survey was online for a year and respondents were asked to report on their routine over the previous week to minimise recall bias. The survey covered the horses’ stable and turn-out routine and environments, including opportunities for social contact with other horses. Respondents were also asked to rate the frequency their horse displayed 20 stable-related and handling behaviour problems. Data on 1,850 individual horses were collected. Stable-related and handling behaviour problems were displayed by 82% of horses sampled. The findings suggest a trend towards year-round stabling. The restriction in turn-out opportunities may have welfare costs for the horses involved. The high prevalence of stable-related and handling problems, including stereotypies, is a concern.

Keywords: animal welfare, behaviour problems, horse, husbandry, management, survey

Introduction

Inappropriate housing and management have been associated with equine health and behavioural problems (Ödberg & Bouissou 1999; Hotchkiss et al 2007a) and may have wider implications for training, performance and the horse-human relationship (Hausberger et al 2008). There is little information about the type and variety of management procedures currently being employed for domestic horses in practice at ground level in everyday husbandry situations (Harris 1999; Hotchkiss et al 2007a). Survey-based studies, for example, Mellor et al (2001), Hotchkiss et al (2007a) and Ireland et al (2011), have generated some baseline data on the housing and management of UK leisure horses, but have tended to focus on the horse’s general husbandry regime rather than the specifics of their stabling and turn-out environments, including their opportunities for social contact.

Social and physical inadequacies of some domestic management systems have been identified as likely causes of heightened aggression and undesirable reactions to humans (Kiley-Worthington 1997; Zeitler-Feicht 2004; Hausberger et al 2008). Stereotypic behaviour problems may also be expressed and have been the focus of most scientific studies exploring abnormal equine behaviour to date (eg McGreevy et al 1995a,b; Bachmann et al 2003; Christie et al 2006). But the behavioural problems of greatest concern to leisure horse owners are likely to be those that directly affect their day-to-day interactions with their horse, and therefore these problems warrant further investigation. Furthermore, the tendency for established stereotypes to become emancipated from their original cause can limit their use as indicators of current welfare status (Mason & Latham 2004). Consequently, non-stereotypic behaviours may also provide a more accurate indication of a horse’s welfare state as regards its current environment and husbandry routine.

Traditional management regimes are widely employed by owners without questioning their impact on the horse. To see any improvements in the welfare of domestic horses these long-held beliefs and practices need to be challenged (Goodwin 1999; Nicol 1999). To do this we need to understand just how leisure horses are being managed and the prevalence of behavioural problems within this population. This paper quantifies the day-to-day management practices and prevalence of owner-reported behavioural problems in the stable/stall (hereafter termed stable-related) and when handling in a representative sample of UK leisure horses.