

The Secret To Successful Hoof Care:

Don't Kill A Fly With An Elephant Gun

By Ray Tricca

It took 25 years, an emergency root canal, and the International Hoof Care Summit for me to finally understand the metaphor about the fly that is the secret to successful hoof care.



Twenty five years ago, the co-founders and researchers for *SBS Equine Products*, Dr. John Pautienis and Dr. Rick Shakalis, uttered those words to me for the first time “*You don't kill a fly with an elephant gun* “. I did not realize it back then, but I do now, that they were defining a corporate philosophy which is *the secret to successful hoof care*. Like *The Perfect Storm*, which is a rare combination of circumstances that changes things drastically, it took a combination of three events coming together (25 years in business, an emergency root canal, and a trade show seminar) for me to finally grasp *the secret to successful hoof care*.

International Hoof Care Summit

It all happened while attending a scheduled seminar at the recent the International Hoof Care Summit. The topic was “*Dealing With Anti-Fungal Options*”. The room was filled with over 200 professional farriers, veterinarians, and three panelists who each gave their own insight on the subject of fighting hoof disease. The panelists came from different backgrounds. The first panelist worked for a manufacturer of animal health products. The second panelist was an farrier. The third was a vet.

The Fly is like a tiny microbe

The panelist who worked for a manufacturer of hoof care products was very helpful in explaining some confusing issues regarding hoof infections. He pointed out that thrush in horses is a bacterial infection and not a fungus as it is with human finger nails. He also discussed that *white line disease* is a combination of fungus and some bacteria. What I concluded from this panelist was that treating a hoof is not as simple as it seems. The domestication of the horse has created some very unique challenges in fighting these tiny microbes, because they have formed alliances with one another and hide among healthy tissue (like a fly in the stall).

A great portion of time was devoted to discussing the problem of hoof infections in the sole and frog. Thrush seemed to be the big issue because it is so difficult to defeat. The panelist on the panel who was a vet, made a positive contribution on the subject of thrush.

Instead of discussing his own personal experiences with thrush, he held up a copy of a December 2009 report on thrush field trials by *The Horse-Journal*. The report evaluated and compared some of the best known homeopathic and commercial thrush treatments in the world. He suggested that everyone in the room get a copy of the report because the results come from extensive field trials which compared most products. *The Horse-Journal* is subscriber funded publication and, I believe, do not accept advertising dollars. The vet seemed to have confidence in the report because it was a comparative study by independent researchers.

The Elephant Gun

The third panelist was a farrier with over 30 years of experience. We know he had 30 years of experience as a farrier because he said he purchased a 50 pound bag of copper sulfate 30 years ago to treat thrush. He said he was still using product from the same bag. I know that this panelist's heart was in the right place, but much of what he said is debatable. Here lies the problem. As the panelist spoke, I immediately remembered Dr. Pautienis's metaphor, "You don't kill a fly with an elephant gun ". This man was using the elephant gun. Harsh chemicals can cause collateral damage to healthy tissue.

The slides shown on a big screen were of this panelist spreading a handful these green granules (undiluted copper sulfate) on to the frog and sole of a hoof. This was his method of treating thrush. Copper sulfate is difficult to get because it is so toxic. When it is used in commercial products, it is almost always diluted in a liquid in parts per million. Most commercial products and raw chemicals like copper sulfate, should be used only after a clear understanding the possible side effects to healthy hoof tissue, handlers, and the environment. Sometimes combining chemicals can make them extremely hazardous.

Another photo showed the results of a hoof resection that had white line disease. The panelist treated the resection with a commercial product he called safe. The product contained formalin which is embalming fluid. As a photo of the product flashed on the big screen, he said the product was safe. No doubt, embalming fluid can kill fungus and bacteria, but it also so powerful it can kill sensitive new hoof tissue as well. That's why it is used for embalming. Powerful toxins can cause collateral damage to healthy tissue. It's like shooting a fly with an elephant gun. SBS Researcher, Dr. Rick Shakalis told me 25 years ago that bacteria was easy to kill. The challenge, he said, was killing them where they hide without harming the surrounding healthy tissue.

Lessons from a root canal

The day before I left to fly to the *International Hoof Care Summit*, I had an emergency root canal procedure at my local dentist. The root in my cuspit was badly infected and had to be drilled out. An hour and a half later I left his with office a prescription for a two week supply of antibiotics and some pain medication. I also had appointments for two more sessions to fill in the canal and for a new crown. The dentist emphasized how important it was not to miss taking the medication for the duration, because the canal could become reinfected.

When I got to the *International Hoof Care Summit* and attended the seminar on *Anti-Fungal Options*, I got the impression that almost everyone in the room was looking for a magic bullet for the elephant gun. It's in the culture of the farriers to be expected to carry the heavy weapons. The farrier cannot be there daily to administer a long term therapy that may take several days or even weeks to fix. They usually do the best job that they can with one strong application and hope for the best. Sometimes this works.

This reminded me of my dentist's final comment to me before I left his office, "make sure you take your medication every day until the bottle is empty". He made me responsible for treating my own infection until he could work on the tooth again in a week. Perhaps farriers should write *non-medical* prescriptions for handlers or horse owners to apply daily. *Non-medical* prescriptions are only recommendations, but they do stress the importance of administering treatments consistently until an infection is under control.

What took 25 years to learn

A funny thing happened after 25 years. The original thrush formula that Dr. Shakalis developed for his daughter's horse, Coco, 25 years ago, was picked as the *Best Thrush Remedy* on the market in *The Horse-Journal*, December 2009. After a year of field trials they said the product killed even the most stubborn cases of thrush that nothing else could touch. It did this without harming young sensitive hoof tissue. They also said it seemed to last longer as well.

I swelled up with pride when the vet panelist held up a copy of *The Horse-Journal* at the *International Hoof Care Summit* and recommended that farriers read about the study on thrush remedies. We knew that we had a good product because it had proven the test of time; however, we were delighted for the recognition of having one of the best products in the world, even if it took 25 years.

Summary

What is the secret to successful hoof care? The answer is simple, "don't kill a fly with an elephant gun". What does this mean? Let me list them. 1). *Treat the fungus and bacteria* without harming the surrounding healthy tissue. Consider using products that would not burn or harm your own skin for example. 2). *Plan on treating the infected hoof consistently*, over time, or the infection may grow back. Avoid using harsh chemicals. Farriers should write out *non-medical* prescriptions to handlers or horse owners who will administer their recommend treatments. 3). *Use only commercial preparations* that were made to treat these infections, not home-made remedies. Commercial preparations are generally safer to use than home-made treatments, which can be harmful to healthy tissue. 4). *Read publications* like *The Horse-Journal* that publish test results of field trials on horse products. They do not accept advertising, so their biases are limited. 5). *Remember that diet, nutritional supplements, and stall conditions* can affect hoof care too. Good luck! For more information on horse care go to www.sbsequine.com/articles.