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STUDY REVEALS FUTILITY OF WHIPPING RACEHORSES

Whipping racehorses is pointless and does not make a difference to the outcome of the race, new research from two University of Sydney veterinarians has revealed.

The study¹, which has been peer-reviewed and published by the Public Library of Science², investigated the impact of whipping on performance in Thoroughbred races.

Study co-author and Honorary Associate Professor, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Dr David Evans, said the results offer no support for the retention of whipping in horse racing.

“We looked at running times in a series of races, how whips were used and whether that whip use influenced the outcome of a race. What we found was that whipping did not affect the probability of whether or not a horse finished a race in the first three placings.

“How a horse ran in the first part of a race, when it wasn’t being whipped, was the most critical factor in racing success. So horses are being whipped in the final stages of a race, in the face of muscle fatigue, for no benefit.”

Animal behaviour expert Professor Paul McGreevy (co-author) said he hoped this research would highlight the fallacy and futility of whipping.

“The reason for whip use has traditionally been the need to be seen to ride the horse out and the suggestion that you can steer a horse with the whip. Many horse riders, and certainly these findings, refute that.

“Top performance horses have been bred and prepared to give of their best. Add to that excellent horsemanship and you’ve got a winning combination. That’s all

¹ An investigation of racing performance and whip use by jockeys in Thoroughbred races – Evans, D.L., McGreevy, P.D. Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, NSW.

² <http://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0015622>

you need. We have evidence here that great horsemanship does not involve flogging tired horses.”

The research was funded by RSPCA Australia and carried out with the assistance of Racing New South Wales. RSPCA Chief Scientist, Dr Bidida Jones, said the results will help end the debate over whether there is a place for whipping in the future of Australian Thoroughbred racing.

“This study has found that jockeys use whips just as people would expect – to try to make their slowing horse recover speed in the closing stages of a race in the hope they will get a place. That’s not surprising. What is surprising is the finding that whipping doesn’t make any difference.

“Jockeys may as well save their energy, keep their hands on the reins, and head straight for home. Their horses will be so much better off for it,” said Dr Jones.

Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney, Professor Rosanne Taylor, said this report will challenge traditional thinking.

“Science has the ability to challenge our views of what is otherwise considered the norm. This result is a good example of how evidence can inform the way we work with animals to promote their optimal performance and welfare.

“In this instance, the future wellbeing of Australian racehorses is looking brighter, because we now better understand that horses give their best when they are not whipped, before the 400m mark, positioning themselves for a win or place.”

The Study is available on the Public Library of Science website:

<http://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0015622>

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Dr McGreevy is Professor of Animal Behaviour and Welfare at the University of Sydney and is recognised by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons as a specialist in Veterinary Behavioural Medicine. His research focuses on the behaviour and welfare of horses. He is the author of six books and over 100 peer-reviewed research articles.

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Dr Evans is an equine sport science consultant and has more than thirty years experience in horse health and training. He holds a PhD in equine exercise physiology from the University of Sydney. His body of research includes the scientific and practical aspects of fitness testing, training and athletic performance of racehorses.

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