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Danville veterinarian treating horses with stem cells

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By DAVID BROCK
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A Danville veterinarian is delivering cutting-edge therapy to horses that may end up running at some of the most famous racetracks in the world. He said it is also helping man's best friend. Dr. Joe Yocum recently started the Centre for Regenerative Medicine in Salvisa where he provides stem cell and other therapies to horses. Yocum said the stem cell infusions also are having encouraging success on arthritic dogs.

"What scientists are learning about is how to harvest the body's own way to heal itself," said Yocum, who compares how stem cells work to the way a fire department springs into action. "We are taking those processes involving stem cells and growth factors and using them to stimulate healing."

Yocum began working with MediVet in Nicholasville, a leading developer of stem cell therapies, a couple years ago after working as general manager for Overbrook Farm in Lexington and has become a hot commodity for horse trainers in the area.

The vet, who also has a private practice mainly devoted to horses, set up shop at The Bluegrass Equine Center in Salvisa, a facility that provides other rehabilitation for horses, about a year ago. The equine center gives Yocum a location with lots of space for his patients and quick access to Keeneland, where some of the young horses he worked on Tuesday will hopefully be headed once they fully heal.

So far, Yocum has treated about 50 cases ranging from soft-tissue ailments in ligaments and tendons to bone lesions. He would like to see the therapy used to treat bleeding in the lungs and the hoof condition laminitis, which also frequently occurs in race horses.

The technique that has drawn the most attention is one in which Yocum withdraws adipose, or body fat, from the area at the base of the tail by making a small incision and using liposuction. After he also withdraws blood, the material is sent to a lab in Nicholasville where a cocktail packed with stem cells is produced and returned within hours.

Yocum said the mixture is rich with growth factors that scientists still are studying to understand how they work with specific kinds of tissue. He said he can currently get as many as three billion stem cells in a single sample, which is enough for several injections.

When Yocum first started working with stem cells, he offered the services for free on his first two patients, which bone lesions had rendered worth little as racers. After a course of stem cell therapy, both horses recovered and sold for high prices.

The current price for the therapy is about \$1,800 for horses, but Yocum said the increasingly high yield of stem cells he can get has allowed him to freeze samples for future uses. The price to treat a dog is less, Yocum said. On Tuesday, Yocum was using another healing solution called autologous-conditioned serum, which helps stop inflammation in horses' ankles. Horses with joints that would become surrounded by scar tissue now can be ready to run pain-free relatively soon.

Yocum also is employing a third treatment that uses plasma-rich platelets for tendon and ligament injuries that can cause lameness. A similar therapy reportedly has been used by some professional — human — athletes. Yocum was profiled recently for being the first to use stem cell therapy for horses in the state of Indiana, along with another veterinarian. He also has been doing work in Hong Kong and Australia, where MediVet develops much of its technology.

Although he said stem cells are not a magic bullet for some conditions that have progressed too far, Yocum said

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he and others have seen them deliver healing power that can even mean the difference between life and death for animals. He gave the example of a horse recently which an insurance agency essentially told the owner it would pay off on the policy if the animal was euthanized. Yocum has considerable experience with some of the most regal bloodlines in thoroughbred racing. After graduating from the University of Kentucky and Auburn College of Veterinary Medicine, he worked for the well-known Hagyard Davidson and McGee in Lexington for 15 years. While there, he began working with Overbrook, eventually becoming general manager of the farm that was home to the famed Storm Cat, who fetched as much as \$500,000 in stud fees. Now Yocum devotes most of his time to learning about what is still a fast-evolving field of both scholarship and practice. Judging by how far the techniques have come in the last couple of years, he said it is only a matter of time before there are applications for adult stem cells in humans. "We're learning so much as we go along and making fairly rapid progress," Yocum said.

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