CASE REPORT

Aggression and intolerance of separation from a mare by an aged gelding

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INTRODUCTION

Aggression is a common behavioural problem in horses (Houpt 1987). The aggression can be directed towards people, horses or, rarely, other species. Because of their size, aggression by horses is always a serious problem. Another common complaint is misbehaviour of the horse when separated from its herd-mates. In this particular case the horse exhibited both problems. The diagnostic problem was to determine whether the two problems had a common aetiology. In some cases separation causes nothing more than a few neighs; in other cases the horse may injure itself trying to rejoin its herd. These problems are usually worse when only 2 horses are involved, probably because the horse left behind has no other herd-mates.

CASE HISTORY

The horse was a 12-year-old bay Swedish Warmblood gelding, obtained by the owner from Cornell University 5 years previously and was used for dressage. The problem was first noted 9–10 months before presentation and had become much worse after the gelding was moved to a new environment where he was stabled in a box stall next to a mare and turned out into a pasture with the mare during the day, weather permitting.

The presenting problem was agitation when alone: the horse would neigh, urinate, defaecate, lash his tail, rear and kick the stall. If tied, he would pull back and at pasture would walk continuously, neither grazing nor drinking. When returned to the mare the gelding would drink large quantities of water and rest.

The aggression had first been noted at a location where the gelding had been pastured with mares and foals. He would stand over the foals when they were lying down and call to them if they were out of sight. When anyone attempted to approach the foals the horse would rear and move between people and foals, rearing at someone attempting to push him aside. At initial presentation the only aggression toward the owner was observed at grooming when the gelding would lift his legs and swish his tail. Later he began to challenge the owner, striking at her when she approached him. Although previously he had been a very quiet riding horse, he had become difficult to control under saddle.

CLINICAL FINDINGS

The referring veterinarian had found no physical problems. A farm call was made and the behaviour of the horse observed and videorecorded. The gelding stood quietly in his stall until the mare was removed from the barn. He then began to neigh loudly, rear and plunge. This continued for the 10-min period of separation.

DIAGNOSIS

Stallion-like behaviour with accompanying aggression and agitation at separation.

TREATMENT

The owner was advised to move the horse to an environment where there were no mares. If this were not possible, drug treatment was recommended. A feed additive was also dispensed.

The gelding was treated with fluphenazine oenanthate, 25 mg intramuscularly.

FOLLOW-UP

The horse would not eat the feed additive but his behaviour was improved markedly for 3 weeks after fluphenazine administration. The gelding was quiet and ate regularly. He
was moved to a farm where he was the only horse. After 1 month the owner added a mare to the environment and the original signs reappeared. The owner sold the horse because she did not want an animal on drugs.

**DISCUSSION**

Stallion-like behaviour occurs in 30% of geldings (Line et al. 1985). It is unclear why this behavioural problem did not appear for some years after the owner acquired him. He may not have been able to dominate all other herd mates before or he may not have had mares to defend. He showed some aspects of stallion behaviour such as protection of mares and foals and bonding, but did not mount.

Aggression towards people is also a common behaviour problem of other companion animals, particularly dogs whose aggression has been subdivided in various ways according to the presumed motivation of the animal (Borchelt 1983; Landsberg 1991). The categories most often described are: dominance, territorial, fearful, pain induced and sexual. In this study, the referring veterinarian's examination ruled out pain-induced aggression. The fact that the horse approached people to strike at them indicates that he was not fearful. In addition, most fearful horses kick rather than strike when they are free to turn away from the perceived danger. Horses are not territorial animals and so territorial aggression would not be expected. The remaining categories are more difficult to exclude. Dominance aggression usually involves guarding of a scarce resource; in the case of horses this is usually food, but can also be shelter or water. Dominance aggression is most likely to be directed at a member of the same species and is the type of aggression seen when horses displace one another in a feeding situation. Another manifestation of dominance is aggression towards an invader of the animal's immediate space. The gelding's misbehaviour during grooming might be an example. Sexual aggression or mate guarding seems to be the most likely cause of this gelding's aggression, because it occurred only in the presence of a mare.

Fluphenazine oenanthate is a trifluoromethyl phenothiazine derivative tranquillizer used in the management of human psychotic disorders, particularly for patients who are not willing to accept oral medication. In man, the onset of action is generally within 24–72 h. Amelioration of symptoms is seen for 1–3 weeks. The response in the gelding of this case lasted 3 weeks. The mechanism of its therapeutic action is unknown. It has been used successfully in horses, but in large doses may lead to a Parkinson-like syndrome (Brewer et al. 1990).

**REFERENCES**


