

Hyperbaric oxygen: it's fine for burns, okay for horses, but don't ask for it just because you have a leg ulcer or stroke! - Editorial

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In news earlier this summer 5 horses in Lexington, Kentucky were attacked by an unknown human(s) with an injection of a caustic substance, in the middle of the night. The injected material was shot into their upper leg, maiming them immediately. As these horses were saddlebreds, they were immediately attended to with the finest university veterinary medicine. Vets from Cornell University recommended among other treatments, hyperbaric oxygen and stem cell therapy. At the time of this writing it is unclear what their outcome will be. However, it is striking that the veterinarians all agreed that for crisis-care in managing a caustic substance, hyperbaric oxygen should be one of the preferred therapies.

Hyperbaric oxygen can only be administered in large chambers where oxygen is under so many atmospheres of pressure, that it is quite capable of diffusing through ischemic and necrotic tissues, to provide much needed oxygen. One can only wonder about the size of such units for a horse. In humans the great big secret of the burn-treatment world is the "hush-hush" use of hyperbaric oxygen. This is the secret weapon that burn units from Seattle to Boston all employ now when the burn is hopelessly failing under standard burn treatment. Interestingly enough, most burns do make an exceptional turnaround when hyperbaric oxygen is administered.

The great misfortune for hyperbaric oxygen is the complete refusal to permit its use with simple, chronic problems of aging, as well as in the acute/chronic phases of stroke. Two treatment centers in the US, one in Florida under Dr. David Perlmutter, and a second in California under Dr. David Steenblock, both herald the use of hyperbaric oxygen for stroke. These centers get very good results with stroke victims--in fact much better than average. Hyperbaric oxygen has a wide variety of other uses which Medicare has deemed to be unreliable and not insurance coverable (in fact, Medicare has listed hyperbaric oxygen as quackery for these other uses). Hyperbaric oxygen would be an excellent modality for use in ulcers of peripheral vascular disease as well as a supportive treatment for atherosclerotic disease. However, it is not possible in Seattle or Boston to obtain hyperbaric oxygen for stasis ulcers, atherosclerosis, or stroke.

It seems that hyperbaric oxygen is only a tool for saddlebred horses, burn victims, and divers with the bends. It is not to be used for ordinary humans with ordinary conditions.

Addendum

According to the July 21 New York Times, 3 of the 5 champion saddlebreds who had been poisoned by an unknown agent three weeks earlier were euthanized. Wild Eyed & Wicked, the Triple Crown champion, was buried on July 17th--a photo of his trainer placing flowers over the grave gives testimony to the high emotions experienced by the Lexington, Kentucky horse show community. Despite active investigation by state police, the poison, suspected to be something purchased from the hardware store, remains unknown.

The poison had been injected in the foreleg causing a massive swelling to appear around the knee with infection. Above the hoof a massive localized infection literally dissolved the flesh. Wild Eyed & Wicked also developed laminitis, an inflammation of the hoof due to compromised circulation in the leg. As the end approached, the horse was nearly unable to hold itself up.

No information is provided in the New York Times report whether hyperbaric oxygen treatment had been used, discontinued, or never used at all. However, it is a testament to the heroic benefits of hyperbaric oxygen that veterinarians even considered using this treatment.

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Bibliography

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