Soundness in the Horse

A Guide for Buyer and Seller

Peter Gray, M.V.B., M.R.C.V.S.

J. A. Allen
London
To Karen
Whose Gifts Make Birds Sing
To Peg and Nan
Lately Gone
And to My Family
Just For Being There
Most people involved in the equestrian world at any level buy or sell a horse at some time and almost every transaction will involve the acquisition of a veterinary certificate of soundness. Until now, there has been no manual dealing with soundness and even in professional literature the subject has received only scant attention.

Horse-owners, whether they be buyers or sellers, will welcome this book because Peter Gray not only explains the mechanical aspects of equine soundness in great detail accompanied with profuse anatomical drawings but also deals with the general health of the horse and the complexities of conformation, movement, vice, temperament and suitability.

Advice is given on the presentation of animals for veterinary examination both for sale or in competitions such as eventing and endurance rides. The process of purchase, whether from private vendor or sale-ring, is explained, as are conditions of sale, trials, legal pitfalls, warranties and declarations.

For the veterinary surgeon or student there is a wealth of information based on the experiences of one who has been vetting horses for more than two decades. The value of this is not simply in the clinical material but also in the side-issues which make soundness examination such a controversial issue.

Everyone, from the person selling on an outgrown pony, to the professional owner buying a million-pound racehorse will learn a great deal from SOUNDNESS IN THE HORSE.

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>xv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author's Note</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 First Impressions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Sale</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Buyer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Vendor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor's Certificates</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Approach</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of the Horse</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance and Balance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Horse's Reactions to the Handler</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible Discharges</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Health</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infectious Disease</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin Conditions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcoids</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanoma</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warts</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infectious Lesions on the Skin</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Termination</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Sale Yard</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Heart and Eye</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anatomy of the Heart</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Sounds</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Rate</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Affecting Heart Action</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anatomy of the Eye</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Affecting Soundness of the Eye</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

Tendons 62

Causes of Injury 63

Common Factors Involved 64

Comment on Scanning Tendons and Leg Structure 66

The Suspensory Ligament 66

The Fetlock Joint 67

The Proximal Sesamoid Bones 68

Heat and its Detection 69

The Phalanges 69

First Phalanx (P1) 69

Second Phalanx (P2) 69

The Pastern Joint 70

The Foot 71

Third Phalanx (P3) 73

Cartilages of the Foot 74

The Coffin Joint 75

Distal Sesamoid of Navicular Bone 75

External Anatomy of the Hoof 75

The Wall 75

The Sole 76

The Frog 76

The Bars 77

The Effect of the Foot on Circulation 77

Breed Influence on Foot Shape 77

The Back, Abdomen and Hind Limb 79

The Back 79

Anatomy of the Abdomen 79

The Inguinal Region 80

The Surface of the Dock 80

The Pelvic Girdle 81

Surface of the Pelvis 82

Anatomy of the Hind Limb 82

The Hip Joint 83

The Femur 84

The Stifle Joint 84

Movement of the Stifle Joint 85

The Tibia and Fibula 86

The Tarsus or Hock 87

Movement of the Hock Joint 88

Examination at the Walk and Trot 92

Viewing the Walk from Behind 92

Lameness at the Walk 92

Pelvic Injuries 94

The Action from Behind 94

Turning 95
**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Senses</th>
<th>119</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Sight</em></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hearing</em></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Taste</em></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Smell</em></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Touch</em></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Digestive System</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Blood-Vascular System</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Urinary System</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reproductive System</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Stallion</em></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Gelding</em></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 11 Examination After Rest, and Certification | 125 |
| Certification                             | 125 |
| Description                               | 126 |
| *Pedigree*                                 | 126 |
| *Non-thoroughbreds*                       | 126 |
| *Colour*                                   | 128 |
| *Sex*                                      | 128 |
| *Age*                                      | 128 |
| *Markings*                                 | 128 |
| *Height*                                   | 130 |
| Manners and Temperament                   | 130 |
| Action                                     | 131 |
| Dentition                                  | 131 |
| The Certificate                            | 136 |
| Written Warranties                        | 138 |

| 12 The Variety of Horses Examined         | 139 |
| Examination of Foals                      | 139 |
| *Non-thoroughbred Foals*                  | 141 |
| Yearlings                                 | 141 |
| Two-year-olds                             | 143 |
| Three-year-olds                           | 144 |
| Pre-sale Vetting                          | 144 |
| National Hunt Racehorses                  | 144 |
| Mares                                     | 145 |
| Stallions                                 | 145 |
| Show-jumpers                              | 145 |
| Eventers                                  | 146 |
| Dressage Horses                           | 146 |
| Point-to-Pointers                         | 146 |
| Show Horses                               | 148 |
| Young and Unbroken Riding Horses          | 149 |
| *Ridden*                                  | 149 |
| Ponies                                    | 149 |
Driving Horses 149
Maturity and Soundness 149
Trotters 152
Working Horses 152
The Older Animal 152

13 Special Examinations 153
Radiography 153
Endoscopy 156
Diagnostic Ultrasound 157
Electrocardiography 157
Blood Analysis 159

14 Conditions of Sale and Warranties 160
General Conditions (British Sales) 160
  Broodmare Certificates 162
  Conditions of the Larynx 162
General Conditions (in USA Sales) 162
  Broodmare Certificates 164
Pre-sales Veterinary Certificates in Ireland 164
Contagious Equine Metritis (CEM) 165
Influenza Vaccination 165
Warranties 165
Drugs 165

15 Some Comments on the Law 166
Public Sale 166
Private Sale 166
Certificates provided by a Vendor 167
Buying Considerations 167
Warranty 168
Soundness in Law 168
Vice 169
Description 169
Drugs 170
Unfair Conditions 170
Reasons for Sale 170
Misrepresentation 171
Changes of Name 171
Time Limits 171
Agents 171
Trial 171
Contract at Auction 172
  Buyer and Auctioneer 172
  Vendor and Auctioneer 172
  Buyer and Vendor 172
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving Horses</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturity and Soundness</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trotters</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Horses</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Older Animal</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Special Examinations</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiography</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endoscopy</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Ultrasound</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrocardiography</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Analysis</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Conditions of Sale and Warranties</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Conditions (British Sales)</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Broodmare Certificates</em></td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Conditions of the Larynx</em></td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Conditions (in USA Sales)</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Broodmare Certificates</em></td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-sales Veterinary Certificates in Ireland</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contagious Equine Metritis (CEM)</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenza Vaccination</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warranties</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Some Comments on the Law</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sale</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Sale</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificates provided by a Vendor</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying Considerations</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warranty</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soundness in Law</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair Conditions</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for Sale</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misrepresentation</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes of Name</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Limits</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agents</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract at Auction</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Buyer and Auctioneer</em></td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vendor and Auctioneer</em></td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Buyer and Vendor</em></td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unregistered Horses 172
Points to Consider 172

16 Some Buying Considerations 174
Buying at Sales 174
Veterinary Certificates 175
Unwarranted Horses 175
Inspection in the Stable 175
At the Ring 176
Vetting at Public Sale 177
Private Sale 177
Selling On 178
Veterinary Fees 179

17 Vendor’s Interests 180
Training and Temperament 180
Lungeing 181
Facilities 181
Catalogue Descriptions 181
Declarations and Warranties 181
Heart Murmurs 182
Previous Operations 182
Future Use 183
The Vendor at Public Sale 183
Private Sale 183

18 Examination at Events and Endurance Contests 184
Veterinary Examinations 184
Manner of Inspection 185
  First Examination 185
  First Inspection 185
  Second Inspection 185
  Second Examination 185
  Third Inspection 185
Rules for Dressage Events 186
Rules for Driving Events 186
Veterinary Guidelines for Long-Distance Driving Events 186
  The Preliminary Examination 186
  Halfway Halt 187
  The Finish 187
Long-Distance Rides 187
Examination for Insurance 187

Conclusion 189
Index 191
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Author's Note

This book describes how a horse is vetted for soundness by a veterinary surgeon. Each stage of the examination is described, chapter-by-chapter, with appropriate diversions into other aspects of the horse's anatomy, wellbeing and management.

I have used the male gender throughout when referring to the veterinary surgeon. This is for convenience only and no offence to my female colleagues is intended.
Introduction

The amount of written material on soundness is, for a subject as old as veterinary medicine, extremely scant. The only extensive work published in recent years has been *The Examination of Animals for Soundness* which was written by R. H. Smythe, MRCVS, and published in 1959. Smythe was a man who had spent his life in practice. He was a prolific writer and a distinguished external examiner in anatomy at The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

The inspiration for *Soundness in the Horse* came from an earlier work, *Modern Practical Farriery*, written by W. J. Miles, MRCVSL, and published in 1868. Miles dealt with the subject of soundness in some depth and much of the information in his book is still relevant today.

However, today we are not encouraged to think of any horse as being 'sound' in the traditional sense. Yet the word is still in everyday use in the equine world and it is not likely to leave our vocabulary, nor should it.

The dictionary definition of 'sound' is, according to Chambers, *uninjured; unimpaired; healthy; wholesome.* People buying or selling horses have no doubt what the word means and use it fearlessly. But lawyers and veterinary surgeons are only too aware that soundness, as an ideal clinical state, is exceptionally difficult to prove and seek to avoid the term. Nevertheless, the description appears in the catalogues of most horse sales today, both in Europe and the USA.

In this book, the term is used in its traditional sense, without disrespect, or apology, to anyone. It is used to signify the health status of a horse and the prospect that it will be able to fulfil the purpose for which it is being bought. For example, a horse purchased as a sound hunter must be able to hunt, with no evident barrier to its natural lifespan as a hunter. Any vendor who declares an animal 'sound for hunting' is liable for this to be so. If it proves not to be, the horse can be returned and there could be a case for damages in some defined situations.

The subject of soundness is of interest to anyone who has ever owned a horse, or who ever intends owning one. In this, there is little difference between the professional breeder/owner selling a million-pound racehorse and a private individual parting with a thirty-year-old pony. The purpose of sale may be simply to dispose of an unwanted animal, but it may just as easily be a commercial exercise with the sole objective of making profit.

For the veterinary surgeon, the duty of soundness examination is always onerous, and one of the most challenging responsibilities of the job. Even for the expert, with the experience of many years, the task is one about which it is never possible to become complacent. The next horse examined could always be a first error, the animal that proves - as horses invariably do - that all humans are fallible. It is a thought that concerns professionals...
in this sphere constantly, for there is always the threat of legal action against the individual who makes a mistake, and that is something no one can afford to forget.

The practice of soundness examination is an acquired speciality, for which conventional veterinary teaching is only a starting point. Soundness is a concept which involves many different specialist fields of veterinary medicine, from lameness to cardiology, respiratory disease to ophthalmology. But to say it is a concept is not to give it a mysticism, rather to declare that it is a discipline that involves every aspect of the horse from health to illness.

It is not uncommon to be presented with a horse and get an instant feeling that it is unsound, without knowing why. Inevitably, this suggests instinct, which is quite possibly the case. However, it would be wrong to imagine that such an instinct is naturally acquired, or comes without experience. Its acquisition is based on learning and experience, it necessarily takes time to acquire.

None of this is to suggest, of course, that a preliminary opinion is likely to affect the whole examination or the outcome, nor should it. Every horse is entitled to the benefit of the doubt - though this viewpoint will not please insurers and lawyers! It was R. H. Smythe who said '... it is as culpable to turn down a sound horse as to pass an unsound one'. In other words, it must not be rejected for any fault other than the possession of some basic defect that limits its future usefulness. It cannot be a whim, nor can it be something outside the animal's ambit. During an examination I once watched a gelding being bombarded by a swarm of bees. The animal was being lunged and was sweating, which may have been the attraction. Although the horse did not keep his temper, he was not rejected on account of losing it.

In any vetting it is possible that blemishes of one kind or another will be unearthed. There may be mild respiratory disease, a lump on a bone, even a lesion on an eye. All of these things have to be detected and considered in the final decision. However, the mere presence of an unsoundness does not have to mean the end of the procedure, providing that particular problem is not going to limit the animal's usefulness, and is acceptable to the buyer. Of course its presence may have a bearing on price, but it is important to the outcome that all relevant facts be placed on the table. In this way, it is possible to be fair to both buyer and vendor, and, not least, to the horse.

Soundness examinations today are different from those of a few years ago, where the presence of a defined unsoundness - such as spavin, roaring, etc. - was enough to condemn an animal outright. The situation was cut and dried; the horse either passed or failed. This, however, led to such anomalies as 'has spavin but is otherwise sound'. Naturally, this was open to criticism and an unsatisfactory state of affairs. A horse could have had a bad heart and be otherwise sound, i.e. sound, except likely to drop dead!

Today the final interpretation is more broadly based, the decision reached is open to consultation with the buyer, negotiation with the seller, and, often, second opinion. The procedure, too, has taken on a new - though not totally different - face. It is defined in phases, with a set pattern to every stage. The form and wording of certificates have been standardised, especially in Britain. The old certificate - 'sound in eye, heart, wind and limb' - has gone, being replaced by a style that describes the defects found and expresses an opinion on the horse's suitability for the purpose for which it is being bought. Conditions which were formerly defined as unsound would not now preclude a sale as long as the buyer's intended use was not affected and the horse had a normal
life expectancy. In the USA, on the other hand, vets are advised to avoid commenting on the future use of a horse, simply to record any abnormality found on their certificate.

The tenor of the negotiation will differ depending on whether the purchase is made privately at home or in the yard of a public sales company. The principle difference is that a private sale is conducted with little pressure on time, whereas, in a sale yard, time, to quote from conditions of sale, ‘is of the essence’. Everything tends to happen in the few moments a horse walks round the ring before the auctioneer. Heart-rates increase, mouths go dry, catalogues flicker in anxious anticipation.

People often buy in these circumstances without realising there are conditions of sale, without seeing evident blemishes which are clear in daylight, and without having read descriptions or warranties declared in the catalogue. They may be landed with an animal they do not want and which is not returnable under the conditions of that particular sale.

Many horses are taken to such places to be disposed of, maybe because of unsuitability or unsoundness, very often without guarantee or warranty, and a buyer has to act sharply and with the quick-wit of experience in order to avoid serious error. It only takes the flicker of an eyelid to buy, but it could take a long time to undo the trauma if the animal in question is flawed.

Even where post sale examination is allowed, that too is usually time-limited. If it is not possible to conduct this at the sale yard, there may be less than 48 hours in which to get the horse home, arrange for a vet, and report back to the sales company if it is to be returned. Many people do not start to suspect trouble in this time and may lose their chance altogether. Sometimes problems do not become evident for several days anyway, making for a very tight-scheduled operation.

In a private sale, on the other hand, there is seldom any rush, a trial may be given, and the possibility exists of taking more than one opinion on conformation and use (which may well be outside the ambit of veterinary examination). The negative side of this, of course, is that the price is dictated by the vendor and not by market forces.

Most private sales are conducted on the basis of *caveat emptor*, or buyer beware, which means that you buy at your own risk and with full responsibility for your judgements and decisions. Your protection is the contract you make with the vendor, the warranties on offer, and the opinion of the vet.

In public sales there is some protection provided by consumer laws. But if the particular sale is a dispersal ground for crocks and rejects, anyone buying will have a searching task dividing the wheat from the chaff. There may be horses on view with pedigrees that cost vast sums to create, but their ignominious fall to such a lowly market may have been due to some serious defect. Just occasionally, however, a wonderful bargain is picked up and this is the stuff of dreams.

Vendors are individuals who are simply selling horses; they may be street-wise or innocent. Their aim will be to present and sell their animals for the best price the market will allow. They are restricted by law and conditions of sale from making false claims, issuing incorrect descriptions and offering warranties which will not hold up.

It is the vendor’s responsibility to declare vices, failing which a horse can be returned at virtually all public sales, and many private ones too. The vet is not obliged to become involved in this; modern veterinary certificates advise that this is a matter between those involved in the sale.

It should be understood, however, that some horses exhibit mild vices at times of
stress, and can be returned because of them. They may not affect the animal's usefulness, and frequently only last until it has settled into its new home. Nevertheless, buyers have the right to return such animals, and frequently do; many people not being prepared to accept a horse with a vice under any circumstances.

Some sales companies stipulate pre-sale vetting as a condition when selling young and unbroken horses. This involves full examination for soundness of horses before they ever get to the sale. Its purpose is to eliminate those which are not sound before they enter the ring, or, if they are unsound, to ensure that this fact be known. It is a practice which makes eminent sense and it is to be hoped that no external pressures (mainly legal) will cause it to end.

Examination now is of a more defined nature, confined to the systems and organs which are readily accessible – basically eye, heart, wind, limb and all surfaces of the body. The examination only applies to the condition of the animal at the time it is carried out. All findings are recorded on the certificate.

The question of drugs arises too. A lame horse could easily have been given a drug to make it sound on the day of sale, and this would hardly be declared, or detected. Although blood samples are usually taken if there is suspicion, very often the word of the vendor is requested, or written, and the honesty of the individual relied upon. It is a practice which is open to error.

As far as special procedures are concerned, these are generally carried out at the request of the buyer, or on the suggestion of the vet. They require the permission of the vendor. These tests may vary from radiography of joints and bones to endoscopy of the respiratory system, or scanning of internal and external organs for conditions as diverse as reproductive health in the mare or tendon injuries in competing horses. The implications for these will be discussed later (see Chapter 13).

The task, as already stated, is an onerous one, demanding not only experience and maturity on the part of the vet but also the ability to see through dishonesty and trickery and present a wholly objective opinion in the end which does justice to buyer, vendor and horse.

Veterinary examination for soundness is an essential aspect of virtually all horse sales now. Its importance is in fact growing as animals become more valuable and more people become horse owners. Its contribution to the whole horse industry should never be underestimated. Every buyer, in fact, either amateur or expert, can benefit from the information it provides.
Conclusion

It will be readily appreciated from all the foregoing that the purchase of horses is filled with pitfalls, particularly for the amateur. The fact that even professionals rely so heavily on veterinary examination is proof of the value of the procedure adopted. The world's leading horsemen, be they riders, trainers or breeders will virtually all seek a vet's opinion when they buy.

The value of this opinion is not only the volume of knowledge and experience gained by vets throughout the years, but it is also the proven success of the procedure, which has created demand for itself universally.

As more and more people become interested in the horse, for leisure and sporting purposes, this service will continue to grow in importance.
Index

Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations

Abdomen 34, 79-80
Abscesses 27
Action 94-7, 99, 131
Age 128
Agents 171
Alae 43
Allergic rhinitis 3
Allergies 104
Anaemia 42
Anal sphincter 81
Arthritis 153
Arytenoid cartilages 47
Atlas 48, 113
Atria 12
Auction, Contract at 172
Auctioneers 10, 172
Ausculation 106
Autonomic system 117
Axis 48, 112-13

Back 33-4, 79, 148
Backing 100-1
Balance 4-5, 95
Bars of foot 71, 77
Biceps brachii muscle 29
Biting 6
Bleeders 110, 145, 163
Blood
  analysis 159
  count 188
  vascular system 121
Bog spavin 90
'Bone' 60, 140
Bowels 7

Boxwalker 161
Brain 37
Breathing 6
  see also Respiration
Breed influence on foot shape 77-8
Broodmare certificate 162, 164
Brushing 98
Bursae, Synovial
  see Synovial bursae
'Bute nack' 49
Buyer 1-2, 17, 111, 172
Buying considerations 167-8, 174-9

Cab-horse disease 71
Calcaneus 87
Calcification 74
Canine teeth 40, 131
Cannon 31, 60
Carpal bones 56, 58
Carpal joint 58
Carpus 51, 57-9, 154
Cataracts 20
CEM (Contagious Equine Metritis) 145, 165
Certificate
  broodmare 162, 164
  of soundness 129, 137
  vendor's 2, 16-17, 167
  veterinary 163, 175
Certification 125-38
Cervical vertebrae 112-14
Cervix 122-3
Cheeks 39, 41
Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease
  see COPD
Ciliary muscle 19
Circulation 77
Clavicle 51
Clicking (forging) 98
Coat 6, 27
Coccygeal vertebrae 116
Cobs 127
Coffin joint 72, 75
Coggins Test 145
Colour 128, 141
Colt 140-1
Conchae 38
Conditions of sale
see Sale, Conditions of
Conformation 23
Conjunctiva 20
Constipation 118, 120-1
Contagious Equine Metritis
see CEM
Contract at auction 172
COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) 7, 104, 109
Cornea 17, 20
Corns 72
Coronary band 75
Corpora nigra 17, 20
Costal arch 79
Coughing 105
Cow hocks 89
Cow-kicking 84
Cracks, Hoof 33
Cranium 37, 39, 45
Crib-biting 161, 163, 169, 182
Croup 82
Cryosurgery 8
Cryptorchidism 123
Curb 36, 90, 123
Dangerous horses 5
Declarations 181-2
Denervating 120, 163
Dentition 131-6
Description 126-30, 161, 169, 181
Diaphyses 56-7
Diarrhoea 118, 120
Digestive system 120-1
Digital cushion 73, 77
Discharges
eye 6, 20
nasal 6, 26, 44
Diseases 7, 104-5
Dishing 56
Distal sesamoid of navicular bone 75
Dock 80-1
Dressage
events 186
horses 127, 146
Driving
events 186
horses 149
Droppings 6, 120
Drugs 165, 170
Ears 23, 27, 44-5, 48
lop 119
ECG 15-17, 159
Elbow 30, 56
capped 30, 57
Electrocardiography
see ECG
Endoscopy 106, 143, 156-7
Endurance contests 184-8
Enteritis 6
Epididymis 124
Epiglottis 47
Epiphyses 33, 56-7, 152
Eustachian tubes 28
Eventers 127, 146-7
Ewe-neck 23
Examination
after rest 125-38
at events 184-8
at trot 98-100
at walk 92-7
for insurance 187-8
special 153-9
visual 21-36
Examination of
ear 45
elbow 57
eye 19-20, 23, 44
foals 139-41
foot 71-2
head 23-8, 39, 49
hind limb 88-91
knee 58-9
larynx 47
metacarpal bones 60-2
Index

mouth 40-1
nostrils 43-4
rectum 80
pastern 68
shoulder joint 53-5
spine 166
sternum 51
tendons 65-6
wind 108-10
Exercise 103-11, 178
Eye 6, 10, 17-19
examination of 19-20, 23, 44
wall 17, 24, 130
Eyelids 17-18, 24
Face 37, 39
Faeces 6, 120
False nostril 43-4
Fees, Veterinary 179
Femur 30, 82-4
Fetlock, 31-3, 65, 67-8, 141, 152-3
Fibula 83, 86-7
Firing marks 61
Fistulous withers 53
Plank 34
Flehmen reaction 120
Flexion tests 101
Foals 139-42
Foot 31-3, 36, 71-8
Foot/pastern axis 31
Forearm 30
Forelimb 25, 28-33, 51
Forging 98
Frog 72, 76-7
Future use 183
Galvayne's groove 41, 134-5
Gaskin 89
Gelding 80, 123-4, 144
General Stud Book 126-7
Genitalia 80, 82
Glands 25-8, 46, 48-9
Glottis 47
Grass rings 76
Grass sickness 117
Grease 68
Grey horses 8-9, 28
Grunting 110
Guttural pouch 27-8, 49
Hacks 127
Haunch 79
Head 23-8, 37-49, 128-9
carriage 4, 96
shaking 3
Health 6-7, 118-19
Hearing 45, 119-20
Heart 12-17, 110-11, 211
murmurs 10, 14, 157, 178, 182
Heat, Detection of 69
Heave line 105
Height 130, 141
Hemiplegia, Laryngeal 163
Hernia 80, 140
Herpes virus 24, 41-2, 81
Hind limb 34-6, 82-91
Hip 35-6, 83-4
Hobday operation 47
Hock 25, 35-6, 83, 87-91, 141, 153
capped 36, 90-1
cow 89
Hoof 75-7, 102
Humerus 28, 30, 51-3, 55-6, 84
Hunter types 127, 142, 146
Hyoid apparatus 37, 46
Ilium 34, 79, 82, 88
Incisors 41, 131
Infections 7, 9, 24, 43, 109
Inflammation of tendons 64-5
Influenza 7, 165
Infundibula 134
Inguinal region 80
Inspection 175-6, 185
Insurance, Examination for 187-8
Intermandibular space 46
Ireland, Pre-vetting in 164
Iris 17
Ischium 82
Jaundice 41
Jaw 37, 39, 45, 123, 140
overshot 26
undershot 25
Joint mobility 102
see also Coffin, Fetlock, Hip, Hock, Knee,
Shoulder, Stifle
Jugular vein 27, 48-9
Jumping bump 34, 82

Keratoma 71-2
Kicking 3, 6, 84
Knee 23, 30-1, 51, 56-9, 140-1, 153

Lameness 125
  at trot 98-100
  elbow 57
  hind limb 88-9, 123
  hock 90-1
  shoulder 55
  spinal 97
  splint 62
  tendons 65
  walk 92-5

Laminae 73-4
Laminitis 76-7, 155
Laryngeal hemiplegia 163
Laryngeal structures 143
Larynx 46-7, 156, 162-3
Law, Comments on the 166-73
Ligaments 58, 61, 62-3, 66-7, 72
Ligamentum nuchae 112-13

Limb
  fore 25, 28-33, 51
  hind 34-6, 82-91
  lower 60-78
  markings 130

Loins 79
Long distance
  driving events 186-7
  rides 187
Lower limb 60-78
Lumbar vertebrae 114-15
Lungeing 101, 106-7, 181
Lungs 103-4, 110, 148

Mane 130
Manners 130
Mares 80, 122, 145
Marie's disease 30
Markings 128-30
Maturity and soundness 149
Melanoma 8-9, 28, 81
Menisci 84
Metacarpal bones 51, 58, 60-2
Metatarsal bones 83

Misrepresentation 171
Molars 131
Mucous membranes 41-3
Mud rash 9, 68
Muscular atrophy 29, 35, 47, 53-4, 57, 82
Muscles 28-9, 52, 56

Name, Change of 171
Nasal
  cavities 43
  discharges 6, 26, 44
  membrane 105
Nasolachrymal duct 20, 43-4
National Hunt racehorses 144-5

Navicular
  bone 52, 73, 75, 153
  bursa 63
  disease 4, 102

Neck 23-5, 28, 37-49, 96, 130
Nervous system 112, 116-20
Noise, Making a 156, 163
Non-thoroughbreds 126-8, 141
Nostrils 24, 43-4

Oesophagus 40, 47-8
Older horses 152
Olecranon fossa 55-6
Operations 182-3
Ophthalmoscope 17, 19-20, 119
Orbits 18, 37
Organ systems 112-22
Os coxae 82
Osteodystrophobia fibrosa 31
Ovaries 123

Pain 96, 101
Palate 40, 109
Papillomas 8-9
Paralysis 117
Parrot mouth 26

Pedal
  bone 51, 153, 155
  osteitis 73, 156

Pedigree 126, 140
Pelvis 34, 82, 94  
Penis 123  
Pericardium 12  
Perineum 81  
Perioplic ring 75  
Periosteum 61  
Phalanges 51, 61, 69-71, 73-4, 83  
Pharyngeal lymphoid hyperplasia 107  
Pharynx 156  
Pin bone 34  
Plaques 45  
Pneumonia 7  
Pointing a toe 4, 25  
Points of the horse 22  
Point-to-pointers 127, 146, 148  
Poll 47-9, 113  
 Ponies 127-8, 149, 151  
 Pregnancy 145  
 Pre-sale vetting 144, 163-4  
 Presentation for veterinary examination 3-4  
 Private sales  
 see Sales, Private  
 Proximal sesamoid bones 68-9  
 Pubis 82  
 Public sales  
 see Sales, Public  
 Pulse 46  
 Pupil 19-20  
 Radiography 69, 71-2, 74, 143, 153-6  
 Radius 51, 55-6  
 Ragwort 41  
 Reactions, Horse’s 5  
 Rectal examination 80  
 Reflexes 117-18  
 Reproductive system 121-4, 143  
 Respiration 104-5, 107-8  
 Respiratory system 143  
 Responsibility for horses 160  
 Retina 20  
 Retinal layer 18  
 Returnable horses 161  
 Rhinitis, Allergic 3  
 Rhinopneumonitis 42  
 Ribs 34, 50-1  
 Rigs 123-4, 143, 161  
 Ring, Sale 176-7  
 Ringbone 69-71, 123  
 Ringworm 9  
 Roaring 47, 107, 123, 163  
 Sacrum 34-5, 82, 94, 115-16  
 Saddle sores 79  
 Sale 1-3  
 conditions of 10, 27, 140, 144, 160-5, 170, 174  
 reasons for 170-1  
 Sale of Goods Act 1979 166  
 Sales  
 buying at 174-5  
 pony 150  
 private 1-3, 27, 166-8, 177-8, 183  
 public 1-2, 108, 160, 166, 177, 183  
 ring 176-7  
 Thoroughbred 139  
 yard 10-11, 106-7, 121, 125  
 Sarcoïds 7-8, 45, 81, 123  
 Scapula 28, 51-3  
 Scarring 19-20, 59  
 Sclera 17  
 Seat bone 82  
 Seedy toe 76  
 Selling on 178-9  
 Semen 123  
 Senses 119-20  
 Sesamoid bones 51-2, 58, 61, 66-9, 75, 84-5, 155  
 Sex 128, 141  
 Sheath 123  
 Shins 31, 61, 143  
 Shiverers 119, 143, 145, 161  
 Shoeing 102  
 Shoulder 24-5, 53-5  
 Show horses 148, 148-9  
 Show jumpers 127, 146-7, 150  
 Sidebone 74  
 Sight 119  
 Sinus infection 24, 43  
 Sinuses 44-6  
 Skin conditions 7-10  
 Skull 37-49  
 Smell 120  
 Sole 32-3, 71-2, 74, 76, 91  
 Soundness 20, 23, 152, 168  
 Spavin 36, 90-1, 123  
 Speedy cutting 98
Spine 112-16
Splint bones 60
Splints 61-2, 143, 154
Squamous cell carcinoma 9
Squealers 123, 169
Stallion 80, 123, 145
Stance 4-5
Stay apparatus 58
Sternum 51
Stethoscope 16, 104, 120
Stifle 35-6, 79, 83-6, 89
Strangles 26-7, 42, 46
Stringhalt 95, 119, 145
Stumbling 100
Submaxillary lymph nodes 42
Supraorbital process 23, 37-9
Suspensory ligament 66-7
Sweet itch 9-10
Synovial
  bursae 29, 52, 55, 113
  fluid 52, 58
  sheath 58, 63
Tail 34, 95, 130
Tarsus 83, 87-91
Taste 120
Team chasers 127
Teeth 37, 39-41, 45, 131-6
  see also Dentition
Temperament 5-6, 130-1, 147, 178, 180-1
Temperature 27
Temporal fossa 37
Tendonitis 91
Tendons 31, 58, 61-6, 68, 72-3, 148
Testicles 123-4, 140
Tests
  flexion 101
  hoof 102
  wind 108-110
  see also Examination
Tetanus 18
Thigh 79
Thoracic vertebrae 114
Thoroughbred 126
Thoroughpin 90
Three-day eventers 127, 146
Three-day events 184-8
Three-year-olds 144
Thrush 72
Thyroid gland 27-8
Tibia 83, 86-7
Time limits 171
Tongue 40, 46
Touch 120
Trachea 46-8, 103
Tracheotomy tube 47
Training 180
Trephining 45
Trial 171-2
Triceps muscle 28
Trot, Examination at 98-100
Trotters 152
Tuber
calciis 87-8
coxae 34, 82
ischii 82
sacrale 34, 82
Turbinate bones 39
Turning 95-6, 100
Twins 169
Two-year-olds 143-4
Tympanum 44
Udder 123
Ulna 51, 55-6
Ultrasonic scanning 66, 121, 157
Umbilical hernia 34
Unbroken horses 149
Unfair conditions 170
Unfit horses 109
Unregistered horses 172
Unguinated horses 175
Uranemia 121
Urinary system 121
USA
  sale conditions in 163-4
  vet's certificate in 188
Uterus 123
Vaccination, Influenza 165
Valves, Heart 13
Vendor 172, 183
Vendor's
  certificates 2, 16-17, 167
  interests 180-3
Ventricles 13
Vertebrae 33-4, 49, 79, 112-16
Vertebral spines 79
Veterinary
  certificate 19, 175
  examination 21-36, 184-8
  fees 179
  surgeon 1-2, 179
Vetting 144, 164, 176-8
Vices 10, 161, 169, 174
Virus 7
  disease 7
  Herpes 24
  infection 109
Viscera 79
Vision 4-5, 18-20
Visual examination 21-36
Vocal cords 46
Voluntary system 117
Vulva 121-3
Walk, Examination at 93-7
Wall eye 17, 24, 130
Wall of hoof 75-6
Warranties 10, 33, 144, 147, 160-5, 168,
  171, 174
  written 138, 181-2
Warts 8-9
Weaving 143, 161, 169
Wheezing 104-5
Whistling 104, 107, 163
White line 76
Wind 103-11
Windgalls 33, 68
Windpipe 48
Wind-sucking 47, 143, 161, 169, 182
Wings 43, 48
Withers 28, 33, 53
  fistulous 53, 113
Wobblers 119, 163
Wolf teeth 40, 131-2
Working horses 152
Worms 6
Yearlings 141-3, 162-3
Young horses 149
  see also Foals, Yearlings, Three-year-olds,
    two-year-olds
Peter Gray MVB MRCVS was born in Dublin in 1941. His father, a staff officer in the Irish Army, was a man whose strong farming background crossed many generations and whose genetic ties with the land were evidently passed on to his youngest son.

The author entered University College Dublin in 1958 and began his clinical career in 1964 in a large mixed practice in North Devon. In 1967 he started practice in Fermoy, County Cork, a major growth area in the world of Thoroughbred breeding. Clients, in the main, were professional horsemen, making their living from horses.

From this scene, he was taken into the international sales circuit, acting on behalf of buyers not only in Dublin but at most major British sales. He also vetted for leading trainers and agents buying in Ireland and for individuals buying three-day-eventers and showjumpers.

In 1972 he led the clinical attack in the first European outbreak of equine virus abortion accompanied by paralysis. This particular outbreak remains one of the worst of its type to this day, yet losses were minimal. The manner in which the problem was tackled laid the basis for the way such outbreaks are approached even today. It was subsequent to this that the code of practice now used for this disease was instigated.

For several years in the mid seventies he ran a foaling station under contract to one of the larger studs in Ireland. He also developed an active interest in physiotherapy as a form of treatment for lame horses, as well as the clinical diagnosis and control of virus diseases in racing and competing horses, a field that is still poorly charted in veterinary literature.

In 1983 he left Ireland and took out a permit to train under National Hunt rules, then acted as resident vet in one of the larger racing yards in Britain during a virus outbreak in the following Flat season.

In 1987 he moved to Herefordshire, to the small secluded village where he now lives with his wife and their two daughters.

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