

SPECIAL FOCUS

## INSIGHT

## SMOKING

# Top surgeon reveals fears over long-term health damage to jockeys and stable staff who are using cigarettes as a means to keep weight down

ONE of Britain's leading vascular surgeons has voiced concerns about the number of jockeys and stable staff who, he believes, start smoking in order to help keep their weight down, and the long-term effect it can have on their health and careers.

Michael Gaunt, who is based at Addenbrooke's Hospital, but has held a regular clinic in Newmarket for several years, is anxious that the effects of vascular disease, which results in blockage of arteries in the legs, should be highlighted throughout the industry.

He has urged that racing bodies should conduct research into the lifestyle of jockeys, and other people in the sport who have to control their weight and use smoking as a means of appetite suppression.

The consultant says he has treated stable staff who find it painful and difficult to walk for any distance. He tells of one head groom who can't take horses to Pontefract because he is unable to make it up the hill from the horsebox to the saddling boxes.

He has also known cases of jockeys and work riders who have fallen off horses. If the disease goes untreated it can prove fatal.

"We all know it is cancer which strikes fear into people's hearts," he said. "People hear about hardening of the arteries, and they regard it as just some medical condition that doesn't mean much to them. Yet it's the most lethal condition, with one of the highest mortality rates."



Michael Gaunt: worried about the numbers involved

Gaunt added: "I'm worried by the number of jockeys and stable lads, people involved in horseracing in general, who come in to see me with blocked arteries and vascular disease.

"The cause of the blockage or narrowing of them is hardening of the arteries – atherosclerosis – and that is caused by smoking. Talking to these guys it becomes apparent they smoke heavily to help keep their weight down, and at some stage, obviously, it catches up with them.

"I'd like to see the racing authorities recognise this as a problem, compile data, or instigate a research project, based on the impressions I have formed, having treated many ex-jockeys and stable lads in the ten years I have been doing these clinics, and the number I have seen come through with these arterial problems.

"My worry is that it becomes a habit early in their careers, in

part to keep weight down – and there's no doubt it does help you keep your weight down! Instead of having a sweet, or snack, they have a cigarette.

"But it's the long-term effect, that may not become a problem until later in life, which concerns me.

"When I drive through Newmarket, and the riders are crossing over to the gallops, you do see some of them having a last fag of the morning before they go on to Warren Hill. It would be interesting to do a survey among Flat jockeys, in particular, to see how many of them smoke."

Gaunt explained that blockages in the major arteries of the legs first become evident when calf muscles, or in some sufferers thigh muscles, gradually tighten up, with the result they cannot walk any further, and have to pause.

"They wait a few moments," said Gaunt. "The pain goes off and they can walk on again. That's called intermittent claudication, the first symptoms.

"For jockeys, and all those riding work, it's a bit different. The first time they notice it is when they're riding, and their legs go numb, especially when they're riding short. There's huge strain on the thigh muscles. Sometimes they fall off. That's it. Of course, as soon as they can't ride, they can't work."

The consultant added: "When you're working as a stable lad, and you have to walk alongside horses, it means walking at a pretty fair



Legendary jockey Manny Mercer enjoys a smoke after riding work

lick. They just can't do it without the legs tightening up.

"There's one head lad I treated who couldn't walk uphill. He couldn't go to Pontefract, where, I'm told, there's a hill when they have to lead their horses out of their boxes up to the parade ring.

"He just couldn't do it. He was fortunate enough to have enough expertise that he was kept on by his stable."

Once hardening of the arteries is diagnosed there is a one-in-three chance of having a heart attack or stroke within five years.

"If you stop smoking and change your lifestyle, then the risk factor is much improved," said Gaunt. "If you're half-hearted about it, then the risk of complications grows – and of being dead."

GEORGE McGRATH, president and Newmarket representative of the National Association of Stable Staff, said he would be happy to discuss the smoking issue with the consultant, but added: "Riding racehorses is a bloody precarious way to make a living, and smoking, so they tell me, relaxes the fellow on top.

"That said, I don't think that demographically people in racing

smoke a great deal more than any other section of society. The only area of racing where I would say that people smoke on average more would be the jockeys, who do smoke to keep their weight down, and obviously smoking kills your hunger.

"I don't smoke, but I have never met a stable lad or lass who will tell you they do so to keep their weight down. I think it's more a habit young people fall into and then basically can't get out of."

McGrath, who is travelling head man to Willie Musson, added: "Most trainers are totally against young people smoking. There's a very good reason, as if you throw away an unlit cigarette and you're on a horse who has an exercise sheet on, there's very little to stop that cigarette getting caught up in the flap, and setting it alight.

"It has happened. Trainers, by and large, hate their staff smoking, anyway, because it affects your oxygen intake."

Early last year, a study by researchers at Brunel University, which looked at the psychological effects on 41 professional jockeys aged between 19 and 54, suggested that some jockeys were prone to eating disorders and depression when they were trying

to fast down to a minimum weight for races.

However, Josh Apiafi, then chief executive of the PJA, rejected the claims and said the data used by the researchers was at least five years old.

Anna-Louise Mackinnon, the PJA's medical advisor, said that appetite suppression to control weight was "something that is quite regularly mooted as the reason why a lot of jockeys smoke – though, from my experience, within the equestrian world, for some reason a lot of people smoke".

She added: "Whether it's more common than in other industries I just don't know. However, one of the things I'd like to do over the next year or so is send a questionnaire out to ex-jockeys, and find out what their health problems are now.

"If we find a high incidence of illnesses or medical problems then we can start focusing on them with the current workforce. That the smoking issue, and others, are things we'd like to look at.

"If we find it is causing some quite serious problems in later life, perhaps not until the 50s and 60s, then obviously we'll have to start targeting the younger guys."



**Nick Townsend** reports on a common coalface danger in the world of racing – that of smoking to keep your weight down

# GUN

‘I hope this is a warning to youngsters just starting out’

*Travelling head groom with Sir Michael Stoute, for whom he's worked for over 30 years, John Cork, 60, has been involved with such horses as Singspiel and Pilsudski. He says:*

“I first suffered serious effects three or four years ago. I was on a beach in Eastbourne, with a friend, walking the dog. I'd had a little bit of cramp in the couple of months before – I remember it happened one day when I was out at Baden-Baden. But this time I collapsed.

“I lay there for 20 minutes, only a couple of feet from the shoreline, couldn't move. My friend had walked on with the dog. If the tide had come in I'd have drowned.

“Eventually I got my leg to come back to life, and I managed to get away from the sea. My friend came back, and said, ‘You look crap’.

“She advised me to go to A&E. I said I'd be all right. But on the way back to my car, only about half a mile away, I had to stop about four times. I could go only 100 yards before it

## CASE STUDY

**John Cork**



cramped up again.

“I went to work the next day, but only mucked out one horse before my leg cramped up. I went to the doctor, who referred me to the consultant, Mr Gaunt. I had a good idea what it was.

“The signs had been there for maybe a couple of years. You could see the colour of the leg. It was white. I knew it was all through cigarettes. I'd been smoking since my early teens.

“Mr Gaunt told me my veins were blocked in three places, one in my groin and two at the top of my thigh, and operated on me. It didn't work – though it probably didn't help that three months later I got it kicked in the same area – so Mr Gaunt put me on medication, something I believe they've developed in the US.

“I still suffer badly at this time of year, in the cold weather. But otherwise I don't really have a problem with it as long as I'm walking on level ground, and for not too long a distance.

“The only courses I can't do are Pontefract, because of the walk between the stables and the parade ring, and also Ascot.

“I'm still smoking. Mr Gaunt told me I wouldn't make 60. But I made it last month! If I had my time again, though, I wouldn't smoke. I've got high blood pressure, diabetes now, too, and a gammy leg. I hope this is a warning to the youngsters just starting out. But you just try telling them.”

‘I bent over to tie up my shoelaces and had a stroke’

*Joe Tate, 69, was forced to retire seven years ago, after suffering a stroke. His last job was at Godolphin, but he also worked as stable groom/work rider for Sir Michael Stoute, Luca Cumani and John Gosden. He is the father of retired Flat jockey Jason Tate, winner of an Ayr Gold Cup, Royal Hunt Cup and Horris Hill Stakes. He says:*

“I smoked all my life, since 14. I suppose it was the thing to do, everybody smoked then. The problem started for me when I was out working in Dubai, and started getting these pains in my legs and hips. I could walk about 100 yards before I was hobbling. It just got worse and worse.

“After a year in Dubai, I went to work in California, and it got to the stage where I was in agony riding out. When I went to pull up a horse, I was pulling up on one leg because of the pain. Once I got in and sat

## CASE STUDY

**Joe Tate**



down for five minutes the pain would go.

“Eventually, I went home to see a doctor, and I was told I had narrowing of the arteries. Mr Gaunt inserted a balloon device to open up the arteries [a procedure called angioplasty]. I had it done

twice. It seemed to work the first time for a few months and I was able to ride out on the occasional day in Newmarket, just to keep active. But then, when I was on holiday with Racing Welfare, in Blackpool, I bent over to tie my shoelaces and had a stroke.

“I was paralysed down one side and partially lost the sight in my eye. I've now got tunnel-vision. A year later, I found out that I had prostate cancer. I had radiotherapy, and got the all-clear.

“Then last Christmas, I found I had a tumour in the bladder. They removed that, and I'm doing okay. I still get a bit of pain, though, walking up hills. It's all through smoking, I know that.

“I've been to three physiotherapists to try to stop. I have four children, and seven grandchildren, and none of them smoke.”