



by Elena Fenech

# The Toronto Equine Hospital:

STRIVING FOR PERFECTION, ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE.

"I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT EACH OF US HAS A PERSONAL CALLING THAT'S AS UNIQUE AS A FINGER PRINT – AND THAT THE BEST WAY TO SUCCEED IS TO DISCOVER WHAT YOU LOVE AND THEN FIND A WAY TO OFFER IT TO OTHERS IN THE FORM OF SERVICE, WORKING HARD, AND ALSO ALLOWING THE ENERGY OF THE UNIVERSE TO LEAD YOU."

OPRAH WINFREY

As a young equine veterinarian, Dr. Bonder always challenged the practice of veterinary medicine by constantly looking for a better way to treat and prevent injuries. Over the years, he looked at the care of thoroughbreds along parallel lines of modern human medicine, always trying to bridge the gap.

Unlike many veterinarians, his approach to the care and treatment of thoroughbreds was unconventional; he always pushed the envelope, and was a pioneer in an unlikely setting.

Since his graduation from the Ontario Veterinary College in 1977, Dr. Darryl Bonder had a dream – to build the best equine hospital in the country. Although at times the dream seemed unattainable he never gave up hope, knowing that one day he would proudly unveil his masterpiece.

The present was quickly becoming the future and with his diploma in hand, Dr. Bonder began the journey that would ultimately realize his dream. Upon graduating he began practicing and before long Dr. Bonder became an integral part of the Equine Studies at Humber College, a position that he maintained for eighteen years. While at Humber College, Dr. Bonder made vital connections amongst other fellow veterinarians, perhaps the most valuable being Dr. Peter Vatcher: "I



**The staff of the Toronto Equine Hospital**  
**(Bottom L-R) Kathie Davidson, Dr. Darryl Bonder, Amanda Pilon.**  
**(Standing L-R) Meghan Ling, Dr. Chris Lesbines, Tami Packham, Leroy Trotman, Marisa Giliberto, Evelyn Jozefkowitz, Dr. Peter Vatcher, Saravanan Sundaramoorthy.**  
**Missing crew members: Ian Maddox, Bill Yam, Jill Surette.**

was looking for an associate at Humber College. Upon speaking with Peter, I thought he was an exceptional candidate; we have been working together for twenty years," said Dr. Bonder.

As Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher started to work together, they realized that they shared the same passion and enthusiasm toward the thoroughbred world.

Both veterinarians admit that their profession wasn't chosen lightly, rather it was a vocation. Since the beginning, they believed that thoroughbreds were elite athletes and refused to accept the century old tried and true farming approach; they believed that there had to be a better, kinder way to help horses and horsemen alike.

The old adage "if you don't like something, change the way you look at it" certainly holds true for Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher. As they

set out to raise the bar, they looked at thoroughbreds differently. To them thoroughbreds were just like Olympic athletes and reasoned that the same outstanding innovative medical technology should be available and used on these equine athletes.

In 1995, Humber College closed the Equine Studies Program and both Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher found themselves at the crossroads. They had to make a choice: did they want to practice veterinary medicine out of their car at the racetrack like many of their colleagues, or were they going to pursue their life-long dream of opening an equine hospital? It took them nearly a year before they were able to unveil their creation. The emphasis was placed on quality and efficiency – when they were planning the clinic, no detail was overlooked. Every minute aspect was taken into consideration, ranging from the materials used to the

design of the building. They wanted to put together the best facility money could buy and although it was a long process, in June of 1996, the Toronto Equine Hospital officially opened its doors – finally the dream was a reality.

Since the early days, the hospital gained a reputation as being an excellent facility. Dr. Bonder was the first veterinarian in Canada to perform arthroscopy surgeries on horses. Being a pioneer in the field, he learned the procedure first hand from Dr. Robert Jackson, the father of arthroscopy who brought the procedure from Japan at a time when it wasn't accepted. Before long it became one of the most popular surgeries in the world.

Arthroscopy is a surgical procedure where an orthopedic surgeon makes a small incision in the patient's skin and then inserts a pencil-sized instrument that contains a small lens and lighting system to magnify and illuminate the structures inside the joint. By attaching the arthroscope to a miniature television camera, the surgeon is able to see the interior of the joint allowing a clear view of the cartilage, ligaments, and in the case of thoroughbreds, bone chips. Both Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher stress the fact that when it comes to arthroscopy surgeries there is a better chance for a successful recovery if the bone fragments are removed early and the horse hasn't run with the chip several times. The more training and racing that has been done with the horse, the lower the prognosis is going to be, mostly because more cartilage damage occurs in the joint.

Today the hospital performs about 350 surgeries a year, although there still are skeptics who believe that Kentucky and Florida are the best places to take their horses for any kind of surgery. Dr. Bonder points out that, although they do have excellent facilities in the United States, it's important to remember that a smaller hospital pays more attention to detail. The veterinarians get to know the individual horse and follow up post surgery – it's not like an assembly line where the emphasis is placed on quantity; the quality of the surgery is paramount. During a surgery at the Toronto Equine Hospital there aren't any shortcomings; the emphasis is on the patient as the team of technicians and veterinarians works together. The whole horse is draped, one veterinarian is on anesthesia the entire time and two technicians are present to monitor the vitals of the animal while Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher perform the surgery – it's easier to see all the small bone fragments when two people are

looking. Post surgery, the horse is bandaged and transferred to the recovery room where he/she will be monitored until it's safe to return to the stall. The next few days the dressing and bandages will be reset, making sure that no complications arise; generally, the horse is kept at the clinic for about five days post surgery before heading to the farm.

Although arthroscopy surgeries are the most commonly performed procedures at the hospital, they offer horsemen an extensive radiology unit where, with an overhead x-ray unit, they can X-ray virtually any part of the horse's body. They also offer shock wave therapy, gastroscopy and 3-D ultrasonography.

The newest and perhaps most useful tool used for the prevention of injuries to thoroughbreds has been the nuclear scintigraphy unit. Nuclear medicine has been used on humans for many years to diagnose and treat injury and disease alike, but in the equine world it has only surfaced recently. Now both veterinarians and horsemen alike have begun to recognize it as a powerful tool in the prevention and treatment of injuries.

At the most basic level, nuclear imaging examines the chemical reactions that occur in the horse's body. To produce an image, the horse is given a radioactive substance that is chemically drawn to the site of the problem, whether it's a bony structure or a soft tissue. Once the substance finds its target, it produces an emission that is transformed into a visible image through the use of a camera like a scanner. The resulting image gives a clear picture of the structure, allowing the veterinarian to determine where the problem is and the best way to proceed with the appropriate course of treatment for the individual horse.

Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher credit this new innovative procedure to having prevented several horses from breaking down. During the spring and early summer months several trainers approached them, as they were concerned with horses that were not striding out properly. At this stage, it was difficult to pinpoint the problem; there wasn't any evident lameness in the horses. It wasn't until a nuclear scintigraphy examination was performed that fractures in the shoulder were revealed. If the horses had kept on training the consequences would have been disastrous.

With the expansion of services offered at the clinic, the need for an associate became evident – but it was easier said than done to find an equine veterinarian that was willing to work at the racetrack. It's common knowledge

that, at the track, working hours are extremely long and days off are far and few in between. Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher started looking a couple of years ago for a suitable candidate to fill the position, but when they weren't able to find anyone in Canada, they started to broaden the boundaries and inquired in the U.S.A. Their search led to Dr. Chris Lesbines, a University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine graduate.

Dr. Lesbines was highly recommended and as such had several job offers including positions in California, Maryland, New York and the Toronto Equine Hospital. "Although I had multiple offers, the opportunity to work with such high caliber veterinarians like Dr. Bonder and Dr. Vatcher was too good to pass up," said Dr. Lesbines, who joined the Toronto Equine Hospital in May. Being an individual who is passionate about his job, he was a natural fit from the beginning: "He is a true student of the thoroughbred industry. He is attuned to what the industry is doing; his strongest card is his in-depth knowledge of bloodlines and its traits," said Dr. Bonder. Since his arrival at Woodbine, Dr. Lesbines has been well received by the trainers who emphasize how dedicated, hard working, knowledgeable and considerate he is for the well being of the horses.

All three veterinarians at the Toronto Equine Hospital share the same vision: to be pioneers in the industry. They constantly challenge the practice of good medicine and good surgery; they are driven individuals that love exploring the possibility of raising the standards in the industry – that is the epitome of what they stand for.

Dr. Bonder stresses the fact that at the end of the day, the success of the clinic is a team effort: "The support staff is very talented and well trained, the majority of them have been with the clinic for several years, that alone says something. We respect our support staff and try to culture their development. Without them the system would collapse, they all strive for excellence," said Dr. Bonder. Although each new day arrives with the guarantee of starting work before the break of dawn and finishing long after the last race is run there isn't anything else these veterinarians would rather do. The staff at the Toronto Equine Hospital agrees, there isn't anything more gratifying than being able to see a horse walk again on four limbs when just a few hours earlier he arrived with a broken cannon bone, barely able to hop off the van. To be able to witness that makes everything else a small sacrifice.