Accrediting the Therapeutic Riding Industry

Equine trained Physical and Occupational therapists are required for health insurance coverage in the hippotherapy industry. An alternative career for students interested in equine and veterinary medicine?

Authors: Kelsey Lynch, Shannon Thieme with Julie M Fagan, Ph.D

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Summary
Therapeutic horseback riding is used for people with many disabilities throughout the country. However, these programs can be quite expensive for the families of the participants. Many programs are not funded and since they are not covered by insurance, most families have to pay out of pocket. However, Hippotherapy programs are covered by insurance companies because they require a PT or OT certified therapist with a few days of horse related training. Therefore, all therapeutic riding centers should increase their standards for instructors and have them all be PT/OT certified as well. This would increase funding for the therapy and lessen the burden of this therapy on families that wish to participate. This would also create another path for Pre-Vet students at Rutgers University—creating another career where they can work hand in hand with animals without going to vet school.

Link to our video: [http://youtu.be/xP9DPZYXiow](http://youtu.be/xP9DPZYXiow)

Quiz link: [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ZXJZP5L](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ZXJZP5L)

History of Animal Assisted Therapy and what it is?

(ST) Animal assisted therapy is a type of therapy that uses animals as a form of treatment. They are specifically used to increase the patient’s social and cognitive skills. Using animals as companions dates back centuries ago and is very common in today’s society (3). For example, in the 18th century animals were given to children to teach them responsibility and gentleness. These are the kind of facts that helped make animal assisted therapy a legitimate form. The first case of animal assisted therapy took place in England where mentally ill patients were allowed into the courtyard to interact with a few domestic animals each day. The first documented case of Animal assisted therapy in the United States was in the military on veterans exhibiting Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (3).
Domestic animals have been demonstrated to improve physical health in addition to mental health. A study conducted on coronary heart patients showed that those with an animal companion lived longer than those without. Even Florence Nightingale had written that small companion animals make great company for sick and recovering patients. This can be linked to countless things. Having something to take care of involves a routine inducing a sense of responsibility. Pets provide their owners with a love and a connection through ways other than words, a connection that is indescribable. This deep connection and dependence causes a stress relief and an increase in mental and physical health.

Animal assisted therapy takes place in many settings including prisons, nursing homes, and mental institutions. In prisons they are brought in for inmates, specifically violent individuals. In nursing homes animal companions help to keep the elderly active and provide them with a sense of companionship when friends and family members live far away. In mental institutions and other places that deal with the mentally handicapped, proved that when animals were brought in, anxiety levels were abridged (3). Today’s version of animal assisted therapy involves a wide range of animals including birds, cats, dogs, small domestic animals like rabbits, and what we will be focusing on specifically, horses.

What is Therapeutic Riding?
(ST) Therapeutic riding can be dated back to Ancient Greece as far back as 600 B.C. when most only thought of riding as a means of transportation. This type of physiotherapy was further developed and researched in Germany and mainly assisted patients with scoliosis. This eventually led to the development of hippotherapy. Though very similar to Hippotherapy, therapeutic riding is used to teach riding and its many aspects to people with disabilities. Therapeutic riding is used all over the nation and is usually taught by a certified instructor. Many students who participate in this take their learned skills and use them in everyday life. This may include, stress management, mental processing skills or even interactions with others(1). Throughout the country though therapeutic riding is seen as a recreational activity.

What is Hippotherapy?
(KL) The use of horses by a certified occupational, physical or speech therapist in any kind of rehabilitation is referred to as hippotherapy. Hippotherapy integrates equine movement with therapy sessions. Horse movement can be used since it is a completely repetitive and rhythmic motion that cannot be imitated. Also, the horse’s pelvis moves in an analogous way as humans. These equine movements integrate all senses and can help trigger or develop new cognitive skills of the individual.

Not only has it been shown to improve the health of physical illnesses such as Cerebral Palsy, but it has also been shown to help mental illnesses like Down’s Syndrome, Autism and mental retardation. Surprisingly enough, even patients with impairments as simple as speech impediments have shown improvement with Hippotherapy.

Different exercises are used for each different type of mental or physical handicap. For example, with Cerebral Palsy, the individuals are draped on their stomach over the back of the horse to provide rhythmic movement and increase balance, posture, circulation and core strength before actually sitting on the back of the horse. Also, different gaits of the horse give the rider different
experiences. The walk is more relaxing and enhances orientation and balance while together adjusting the rider to the new therapy. Furthermore the trot increases things like alertness, core strength, muscle formation and strength.

**Who uses Hippotherapy?**

(HL) Hippotherapy is encouraged for an umbrella of disabilities. However, the most common use is to help children whom have Autism or Aspersers Syndrome. Both disabilities are considered spectrum disorders, indicating that the severity of the disability varies from person to person. In the United States, it is averaged that 1 in 110 children have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There is no known genetic cause for an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and there is also a low predominance of having more than one child in a family affected by the same disorder. Children with either of these syndromes may have trouble concentrating or focusing, trouble communicating physically or verbally, display behaviors such as stimming, flapping, humming or rocking. They also have problems with social skills and find it hard to perform daily tasks.

The way Hippotherapy works for these children is completely remarkable. This therapy allows children to relax muscles, sharpen eye contact, gain self-confidence and control, and improve communication among other things (6). The horse’s movements allow the riders body to change and adjust through their muscles and bones, allowing them to become more spatially aware and adaptive to environmental changes. The horse movements also improve core muscle strength, muscle symmetry, balance, posture, flexibility, circulation, coordination, and breathing (which also makes it easier to speak). Many therapy programs do not use saddles in order to encourage the movement of the rider through direct contact with the horse. The thrill of being on a horse is sometimes over bearing for children. Often on their first ride they exhibit the type of behavior that often accompanies changes in their physical environment. This can include crying, screaming, having tantrums, and avoidance behaviors such as flopping down and becoming limp. Instructors need to understand that this is a strange experience for the new rider and most likely puts them out of their comfort zone. It is indicated that the behavior usually stops as soon as the horse is in motion and remains absent for most of the session.

Hippotherapy not only encourages communication skills between autistic children and others, but it also develops a strong companionship between themselves and the horse.

**Therapy aspects/ different motions used:**

(KL) There are many motions and tools used in each therapy session that are adapted to individual’s needs and desired benefits from the program. Many programs work with the rider’s position on the horse first and foremost. There are many different seats that are observed in single riding session. All positions focus on points of contact between the horse and the rider (6). A full seat is considered a 3-point, where the rider is sitting vertically and has their seat/hip, knee and heel in contact with the horse. This position is optimal for absorbing motion thorough the rider’s hips and maintaining balance. If a rider needs to ride in doubles, this is also the position that needs to be maintained. Two point is for a stronger rider, and gives more of a sense of freedom. This position is also called a jumping position, or that that jockeys ride in. these are the only well known riding positions observed, past here they get to be more creative. Often times
riders will lay across horses back, this is called the 4 point position, and encouraging them to elongate their torso and spine and also taking in the warmth of the horse. Maintaining this position on an unstable surface also encourages stability in regards to weight shift and sudden changes in motion. Other exercises encompass elongation and rotation of the rider’s body. Stretching and reaching encourage movement of the rider along with encouraging cognitive stimulation. Common household items such as hula-hoops, pool noodles, blankets, ropes, buckets and sticky notes are all tools used. They support reaching, twisting and turning and also make the session into more of a game than a therapy but still achieving the same results (6).

Certain strides also encourage movement and rotation in different ways. Walking is a rolling stride, where as trotting is choppier and much more challenging to maintain balance. Trotting also allows increased speed, which again gives students a sense of freedom and encourages sacral sitting.

Certification Processes for Hippotherapy:

(ST) To be a certified hippotherapy therapist you must be a currently licensed physical therapist, occupational therapist, or speech and language pathologist in the United States and must have at least three years of experience. In order to become an occupational therapist, they receive a bachelor's degree in OT, and then take the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) in order to become a registered therapist, many programs also combine this with a masters and last a year to 18 months. Physical therapists must have a bachelor’s in science and must go to a certification program accredited in the United States. These programs are usually 18 months to a yearlong. After completing this program, you must also pass the board exams to become a registered physical therapist. The individual also must have at least 100 hours one-on-one straight treatment in scientific practice using hippotherapy. Horse experience is also a must. There is also an application you must fill out and there is a board in place to approve your certification. These qualifications are for the American Hippotherapy Association, however there are less strict requirements for other associations.

Foundations/funding for Hippotherapy:

The American Hippotherapy Association encompasses occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physical therapy all into one therapy. Their main goal is to promote equine therapy and promote it thorough the country. It was started in 1987 and has continued to grow into the booming association that it is today. It is now also part of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, broadening its horizons even more. This foundation is a great way to find a farm that has good credentials and a program to help your child.

Accordingly, since certified therapists conduct hippotherapy, many insurance companies will cover a portion, if not all of the sessions a patient with a disability attends.

Current Hippotherapy Programs?

There are many programs across the nation that provides hippotherapy and other equine assisted therapies and psychotherapies. New Jersey has two that are registered with the American Hippotherapy Association, Rocking Horse Rehab and Special Strides. Rocking Horse Rehab is
located in West Orange, New Jersey. Their philosophy is to treat the whole child and they offer many therapies and services, which gives them an edge on most other programs. Special Strides is the other program in New Jersey that offers hippotherapy. It is located in Monroe, New Jersey. There are many other places in New Jersey that offer forms of equine assisted therapy and can be very beneficial. The choice is yours to make and really depends on what type of therapy will be the most helpful for the individual.

**Why Hippotherapy is covered and Therapeutic Riding Is Not?**

Through doing our survey we found out that many Hippotherapy programs are actually covered by insurance companies. This has a lot to do with the fact that to become a certified hippotherapy instructor you must go through a vigorous schooling and actually become a physical, occupational or speech therapists. Since these types of therapists conduct other therapies that are covered by insurance, hippotherapy is too covered. Insurance companies recognize this and will partially cover, if not fully cover the costs of treatment. Therapeutic riding however is viewed in the eyes of insurance providers as a recreational activity and many will not cover it. My partner and I nevertheless decided to send out a survey to the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsmanship (PATH Intl.) and write a letter to a local newspaper to have therapeutic riding viewed as an equal to hippotherapy. Therapeutic riding is still a legitimate form of therapy, however their methods have not been as vetted as the hippotherapy ones.

**Certification Processes of Therapeutic Riding:**

(ST) Since a therapist does not need to be a trained occupational, physical or speech therapist to be a therapeutic riding instructor, the requirements have somewhat of a blurry line and change from program to program. One of the more popular ones is EGALA, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. EGALA deals with many individuals, not only the mentally handicapped. The certification program is less extensive and includes a 6-day training course and submitting a professional developmental portfolio (4).

**Funding for therapeutic riding**

Funding for therapeutic riding can be found through many developmental disabilities foundations. For example, the Epilepsy Foundation helps families that are affected by neurological impairments and helps provide funds for therapies that may be beneficial for their children (4). Through the division of developmental disabilities in New Jersey, there is money allocated every month towards any therapy and what ever else their child needs (5).

**THERAPEUTIC RIDING AT RUTGERS**

Our original plan: Why we should bring therapeutic riding to RU and why we can’t currently do it?

Originally we planned on conducting an afternoon at the farm focusing on grooming and encouraging interactions with students and Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center. We were going to use Dr. Carey Williams’ research horses to construct a program where participants
had the opportunity to intermingle with the animals. There would be no mounted therapy it would be strictly taught from the ground encouraging touching, grooming, and other hands on interactions with the horse. Our plan was to use animal science students that were accustomed to the unpredictability of the horses to assist us in our service project. We had hoped to observe the interactions between the horses and participants on their first time of being exposed to each other and record the disposition of the participants before and after. Dr. Williams’ insurance and animal protocol encompassed a procedure like this and we did not have to get any further approval from the equine science program at Rutgers University.

Though all the chips fell into place on the equine side, our luck was not as good for getting approval of desired participants. We contacted the staff of Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center about having their students participate in our service project. This would have been our ideal group because it is located so close to campus and we would have been assured that it would be their first exposure to the horses. Transportation would not have been a problem, which was one of our key concerns especially since we are not an established program. We contacted the director of the program Maria Arnold asking to involve her students in our service project.

Unfortunately, her response was, “We deeply appreciate your offer to the Center to participate in a program to change how society functions. Having some of our students/clients participate in a horse grooming activity was a great idea. Our concern is that, children and adults having autism spectrum disorder have unpredictable behavior especially in new situations. Some also have fears exacerbated by new situations. Horses are large, delicately tempered animals that might not react well to sudden movements, behavioral outbursts etc. While some of our students/clients might love the activity, there is too much potential for injury for us to feel comfortable offering this to our families.” Because of this response it brought to our attention that this program should be encouraged at Rutgers University. Hippotherapy is universally used to modify and control behaviors and the fear of an outburst should not be factored in because it is an expected behavior that is minimized through repetition.

Not only would this program benefit patients, it would also benefit current Rutgers University students. For starters the location is convenient for students and participants. Also it broadens horizons for students in fields such as animal science, psychology, education, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. This program would be feasible for internships and would be a great way to establish a new class at Rutgers University and increase it’s outreach, one of the fundamentals of this university. Having a program along this line could increase enrollment in both Douglass and Rutgers University along with increasing funding from the state. Being a leading research institution, Rutgers University has many projects on Autism research and this program would allow them to branch their research into physical stimulation of cognitive abilities through companion animals.

Our transition: Why Insurance Companies Should Cover Therapeutic Riding? KL

Therapeutic riding is a very popular therapy method for mentally handicapped or disturbed people. There are thousands of programs throughout the country, and many of them are nonprofit organizations. However, due to their lack of training for instructors, no insurance companies will accept therapeutic riding as a proven and acceptable form of therapy. This puts a
huge burden on the participants families, and may eventually even make their therapy. We started to make a petition to send out to insurance companies in order to have them cover therapeutic riding. However, it soon dawned on us that the insurance companies weren’t what needed the change, it was the therapeutic riding industry that needed the change.

Our final project: Why is it necessary for Therapeutic Riding programs to upgrade their training levels and become Hippotherapy programs?

For our project, we conducted a survey that targeted the Therapeutic Riding Programs that were all members of PATH. Our survey focused on the general clientele of their program, to see how many people would be affected by our push to make all therapeutic riding programs certifiable. The link to our survey is http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ZXJZP5L. Unfortunately, we only received 9 responses to our survey. Here’s a list of the questions that were asked and a summary of their results:

1. What disabilities does your program focus on (provide approximate %)? (example: 60% autistic, 20% cerebral palsy, 20% at-risk youth) Our results found that most programs targeted autistic children followed by other learning disabilities, Multiple Sclerosis or Cerebral Palsy.
2. For the autistic student, how many times per week is optimal for student progress (be specific for the degree and type of disability if need be). Most students ride once a week. Majority of the programs speculate that riding three times a week would be optimal for the benefits of this therapy.
3. How many sessions on average does a student ride in a week? One session a week.
4. Is there a waiting list for students to participate? How many students are on it? Most programs do not have a waiting list, if they do it’s between 5 and 10 people.
6. On average how far does each student travel to get to your facility? Generally students travel 10 to 15 miles. However for some programs they travel upwards of an hour.
7. How many sessions on average does a student ride in a month? 4-5 a month.
8. What certification do therapists need? All therapists are PATH certified, if certified at all.
9. Regarding funding your facility, in general, what percents would you estimate are from private donations, public funding, boarding, services (lessons), other? Most programs are funded through the money brought in from the student’s lessons. Some programs run fundraisers and receive private donations, but that barely makes up for half the amount that they need to run the program.

All of our responses lead to one thing, it would be very beneficial for students if their therapy was covered by insurance, thus making them a hippotherapy program.

This survey was sent to these programs through out PATH. They included but were not limited to:

Storybook Farm, Inc.
The Red Barn Foundation
Southcentral Therapeutic Riding Inc
The Rainbow Connection Therapeutic Horseback Riding Center**
Cochise Area Network of Ther. Equest. Resources
Dusty Boots
Horses Help
Horses with H.E.A.R.T., Inc.
Stable Influence Charity Programs
Therapeutic Riding of Tucson
Beyond Belief - AR (DBA) Stirrups & Smiles
Beyond Boundaries **
Equestrian Zone-Riding for a Reason
Hearts & Hooves, Inc.
Hope Landing
Horses for Healing**
Animals Plus
B.O.K. Ranch, Inc.
Blue Apple Ranch
Bonita Equestrian Therapy for the Handicapped
Boots and Saddles, Inc.
Canyon Acres Children & Family Services
Canyon Ranch Physical Therapy, Inc.
Dream Catcher of L.A. Therapeutic Riding Centers
Dream Rider Equestrian Therapy**
DreamPower Horsemanship**
EQUI-ED
Equip Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies
Freedom in Motion
Freedom Ranch Therapeutic Riding & Rescue
Galt Horse Assisted Learning and Enrichment Program**
Giant Steps Therapeutic Equestrian Center
Handi-Riders of Northern California
Happy Trails Riding Academy
Harmony Ranch Inc
HEALTHERAPY, Inc. - Equine Facilitated Services
Hearts Therapeutic Equestrian Center
Helen Woodward Animal Center**
Horseplay Therapeutic Riding Center
Horses for Healing Therapeutic Riding Center
Horses Unlimited, Inc.
Ivey Ranch Park Association
J.F. Shea Therapeutic Riding Center
Lakeside Equestrian Center
M.A.R.E. Therapeutic Riding Center
Move A Child Higher/MACH 1
Oak Creek Ranch Riding Academy
Oak Creek Ranch Riding Academy
Partners in Equestrian Therapy
Partners Therapeutic Horsemanship
PoVa Therapeutic Riding Center
Another option for Pre-Vet Students at Rutgers University?

(KL) With raising the level of requirement for all therapeutic riding, there will be many job opportunities opening in the industry. Therefore, this may be an area of interest for students going to school for pre-vet at Rutgers. Since veterinary schools are so competitive, being that there are only 33 in the country, it may be easier for students to obtain a job as a physical therapist and work as a therapeutic riding instructor. According to the requirements of University of North Dakota, all pre-vet students will have already completed the requirements needed to apply to the Physical Therapy program at ND (2). This would be a great field for students to move into, since they will still be able to work with animals on a daily basis and also help someone in need. If the therapeutic riding requirements were raised, this would be a fantastic opportunity for pre-vet students and may also increase the enrollment of students into our Animal Science program here at Rutgers University.

Letter to the editor:

We sent the following letters to Chronicle of the Horse, but they were not published. The first letter is from earlier in the semester, the second is with our new project:

To Whom It May Concern:
Therapeutic horseback riding is basically used to teach people with disabilities how to ride a horse. It is definitely a fun activity for students and many benefit from it. Horseback riding is more than just a activity for them. For many students it teaches them key things like responsibility and companionship. Though there has never been a formal research study on the subject, many instructors see an improvement in students by the week. So why is this beneficial activity not covered by insurance providers? My partner, Kelsey Lynch and I decided to tackle this question and send a survey to therapeutic riding companies around the country. The survey basically asks the programs how they run, how many times a week is the most beneficial for students, so on and so forth. We would like to compile the results of the survey and send it to insurance providers so they may possibly use these results to try and begin research on this intriguing topic and help the students out with the cost. Rutgers University here in New Brunswick, NJ would probably also be a good target for these surveys. As students here, we know that the university is a research one and the facilities to do a therapeutic riding program are right on campus. Not to mention, subjects would be also close by, considering Douglass Developmental is less than 10 minutes away, as well as quite a few helping hands since many students would probably be interested in assisting with a program like this. Our ultimate goal in doing this project will be to help therapeutic riding associations in getting funding from insurance providers and to help their students out as well to help them with the cost of something that is so beneficial. Thank you for your time.

To Whom It May Concern:

Therapeutic horseback riding is a steadily increasing field today. However, with the increasing use of this therapy, I think it’s about time that therapeutic riding step up their qualifications to that of all hippotherapy programs. Since hippotherapy programs require a speech or occupational therapist, many insurance companies would cover the therapy sessions. This would be beneficial for both the patients and the programs. The patients would be able to attend more sessions at less of a cost. Many therapeutic riding programs claim students only ride once a week and sessions cost $40.00. If these programs were to increase the training requirements of their instructors, insurances would be able to cover them and thus patients would be receiving a more effective treatment. Also, since this would be a vetted therapy, the programs would receive more money for their offered therapy. Accordingly, if the Hippotherapy industry began to proliferate, it would be a huge market for students who study animal science and do not get into veterinary school. These students have an obvious desire to work with animals, so this may be an additional way for them to follow their original dreams. Physical therapy and Occupational therapy programs are much shorter and often cheaper than vet school, and have a higher job placement after graduation. Regardless of which way you look at it- for the industry or for the students- raising the bar for therapeutic riding instructors would cause a direct rise in popularity of these types of programs.

References:


