

Physical Therapy, Physiotherapists and Animal Rehabilitation

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The field of animal health care is changing rapidly. This phenomenon is partly due to the knowledge transfer from the human health care field to the veterinary field, but also to the fact that animal owners are expecting and demanding more alternative health care options and a wider range of services for their pets. In addition, more and more owners are partaking in a wider scope of sports with their animals, such as agility, obedience, freestyle, or flyball with their dogs, and dressage, three-day eventing, reining and cutting, or barrel racing with their horses. With greater physical demands on these animals come larger risks of physical injury and, therefore, a greater need for health care intervention to return these animals to full, pain-free function as quickly as possible. The field of animal rehabilitation has emerged as a result of this need, and we can anticipate that this field is only going to continue to expand and grow in the foreseeable future.

Human physical therapy in Canada began in and around the First World War, when large numbers of wounded servicemen began arriving back home from overseas and found themselves unable to cope with life's demands. Intensive one-year physical therapy training courses were set up in 1916 as the nation realized that medical care and surgery were not enough to restore severely wounded men into healthy, functional members of society. Physical therapists in those days administered light and heat therapy, as well as hydrotherapy, electrical treatments, massage, and passive, active and resisted exercises. These early physical therapists were registered and monitored by the Canadian Association of Massage and Remedial Gymnastics (a forerunner of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association – CPA) for the maintenance of high standards of education, quality of treatment, and professional conduct. As demand grew, educational advances progressed, and the first school of physiotherapy was established in 1929 at the University of Toronto, offering a two-year diploma course. McGill University offered the first baccalaureate degree in 1954, but it was not until the 1970's that the 3 to 4-year baccalaureate degree was established as the minimum educational requirement in order to practice physiotherapy on human patients. The current entry-level educational requirement for a physical therapist to practice in Canada is a 2.5-year full time, year-round Masters degree (following a prerequisite Bachelors degree), and by 2020, all university physical therapy programs will change their curriculum to a Doctorate in Physical Therapy (DPT), which will be the minimum educational requirement for an entry level physical therapist. The 3+ year DPT is currently being offered in the United States and transitional-DPT courses are available for practicing therapists who want to upgrade to this degree). Newly graduated physiotherapists (a term widely accepted as being interchangeable with the title of physical therapist) possess extensive knowledge and understanding in human anatomy, physiology, psychology, orthopaedics, manual therapy (soft tissue mobilization, and joint mobilization, manipulation, and stabilization), kinetics, bio-mechanical sciences, neurology, cardio-respiratory sciences, therapeutic techniques and tools, and exercise prescription. In addition, recent physiotherapy

graduates are adept in client health management and case management, as well as in research evaluation, design, and implementation. Currently in the field of human physical therapy, a professional competency exam must be passed upon graduation, and continuing education is a mandatory requirement for licensure. Most physical therapists seek to expand their knowledge in a specialized area of their profession by means of continuing education opportunities. Some of these special interests are reflected in (but not limited to) the official divisions of the CPA: orthopaedics, sports, neurosciences, cardiorespiratory, women's health, private practice, leadership, acupuncture, seniors' health, paediatrics, international health, pain sciences, oncology, and animal rehabilitation. Human patients in Canada have direct access to physical therapist in private practice settings, in other words, they do not require a physician's referral to be able to seek services from a physiotherapist. Physical therapists are authorized and capable of making a clinical diagnosis prior to administration of treatment. In hospital settings, physiotherapists treat patients by physician referral due to practical and policy reasons, but they also carry out physical diagnoses, establish problem lists, and set therapy goals and treatment plans. Regardless of this autonomy of practice, physical therapists continue to work collaboratively with medical doctors and other allied health care professionals in order to ensure that all aspects of a patient's health care are addressed in a patient-centred model of care provision.

The Animal Rehab Division of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, formerly named The Canadian Horse and Animal Physical Therapists Association (CHAP), was first established in 1994 as an organized group of physical therapists interested in using their professional skills to treat animals. In 1994, CHAP was the third such group of its kind in the world, following the lead of Great Britain in 1984 and the Netherlands in 1989. In 2004, the Animal Rehab Division was officially recognized as a special interest group of the CPA. Currently, there are 12 countries with animal physiotherapy groups/divisions which form part of their national physiotherapy association. Other countries include South Africa, Sweden, Spain, Finland, Australia, the United States, Switzerland, Ireland, and Belgium. All of these animal physiotherapy associations fully recognize that additional educational is necessary for a physical therapist to engage in the practice of animal rehabilitation. Each of these countries has taken the initiative of creating its own educational system and setting of standards to train physical therapists in animal rehabilitation / physiotherapy / physical therapy. In North America, there are three certification programs available to train physiotherapists to apply their skills to animal patients. The two existing programs in the United States are offered to physical therapists, veterinarians, and animal health technicians or equivalent. These programs attempt to bolster the different aspects of knowledge of each professional group of students. The Canadian animal rehabilitation program (offered by the Animal Rehab Division of the CPA) limits its enrolment to physiotherapists, and focuses entirely on teaching this single group of professionals, animal principles (mostly canine and equine) such as anatomy, biomechanics, pathology, clinical conditions, common veterinary surgical and clinical interventions, and handling skills, as well as physiotherapy assessment and treatment techniques for these species. England and Australia boast the world's only post-graduate (Masters) degree programs. In the case of The Royal Veterinary College in England, the program offered is a Master of Science in Veterinary Physiotherapy, whereas at the University of Queensland in Australia, the students graduated with a Master of Animal Studies in Animal Physiotherapy. These courses limit enrolment to physiotherapists, and they are two-year course-based programs with a research component and a publishable clinical

thesis requirement. No similar university level program currently exists in North America, and only a handful of physical therapists have completed either one of these Masters programs abroad.

The type of clinical practice in the field of animal rehabilitation is quite diverse. In general, physical therapists have established collegial partnerships with veterinarians throughout North America. Some therapists work out of veterinary clinics, others do house-calls (or barn-calls), some have a home-based office/barn, and others operate businesses or are employed by stand-alone rehabilitation referral centres. Regardless of the type of clinical setting, the Animal Rehab Division strongly advocates that rehabilitation of animals be provided by properly trained physical therapists upon veterinary referral if an animal is lame, injured, or requires post-surgical services. Physiotherapy in the human health care field is often complimentary to other health care services, and the Animal Rehab Division believes that it is with this same professional approach and conduct that animal rehabilitation should be delivered. Members of the Division can obtain professional liability insurance specific to the treatment of animal patients, and the Division encourages direct communication between the referring veterinarian and the physiotherapist providing animal rehabilitation services to their patients in order to ensure that both professional health care providers are aware of the clinical conditions, advisements, treatments, and/or prescriptions provided by the other. At the present time, the practice of animal rehabilitation is not regulated by any Canadian provincial physiotherapy regulating group. For this reason, the Animal Rehab Division is presently engaged in discussions with various provincial veterinary regulatory bodies, such as the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association, to work towards the establishment of guidelines for the delivery of animal rehabilitation by physical therapists in order to provide the best and most professional services possible to ensure the well being of animal patients. At this time, the terms and titles of physiotherapy / physical therapy and physiotherapist / physical therapist are restricted to licensed physiotherapists engaged in the practice of human physical therapy, and hence the term animal rehabilitation is currently used to describe the practice of physical therapy in animals. However, the term animal rehabilitation is not a protected term, and lay persons engaged in massage, chiropractic, and aquatic therapy have been applying this term to their practices, causing confusion for the public as well as for referring veterinarians.

As advances in veterinary medicine take place and as more refined diagnostic tools and techniques become available to animal patients and more sophisticated surgical techniques are developed, greater emotional and financial investments are generally placed on animal 'family members' in our society. Therefore, expectations of longer animal life-spans and increased quality of life are being demanded by the general public. The addition of non-traditional and alternative therapies to the more traditional veterinary medicine practices for the treatment of animal patients appears to be an important step towards improving the overall quality of life and life-span of these animals. Physical therapists trained in animal rehabilitation can provide a wealth and diversity of knowledge and skills to complement the services provided by veterinarians. Physical therapists have a strong background in professional conduct which encourages teamwork, as well as in the application of safe practices, science-based knowledge, and efficacious treatments and techniques. For more information on the Animal Rehab Division, contact animalrehab@physiotherapy.ca.