

**RESEARCH: Past ⇒ Future**  
**How far have we come? How far have we to go?**

**By Kathy Splinter-Watkins, MOT, OTR/L**

*“It takes rare gifts and talents and rare personalities to be real pathfinders in this work.”  
Adolf Meyer, one of the founders of Occupational Therapy (1922)*

“I know that therapeutic horseback riding works – just look at the smiles!”

“Why can’t we just do hippotherapy with our clients – we know it’s the best therapy “tool” around. It sure beats vestibular swings, tunnels, bolsters and balls for that three dimensional movement and sensory integration!”

“Equine facilitated mental health – it’s the best thing since Freud! The connections and meanings established with the horse are like none other!”

### **We Know It Works!**

But, what is “**it**”? And what is it that “**works**”? And why should I consider placing a person I care for (with a disability, no less) in the arena with (or on!), a huge, unpredictable animal that can kick, bite, or run away? Are the risks worth the benefits? What are the true benefits? How can we be advocates for equine assisted activities if we cannot show what it is that works?

### **What has been done so far?**

Research literally means to “re – search”, or “investigate thoroughly”. It is the process of examining what we do and why we do it. Consider how long therapeutic horseback riding has been around and how much has been written. How many true research studies have been conducted?

Hundreds of articles have been written on the special connection between horse and human, and the benefits that NARHA centers provide for persons with disabilities. These articles appear in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, brochures, flyers, and in professional publications. They are generally subjective with an emotional appeal. Additionally, there have been a number of books, workbooks, professional articles and other literature written on therapeutic horseback riding, equine facilitated mental health and hippotherapy – the techniques, procedures, and “how to’s” of the industry.

Very little has actually been done in the realm of “proof” that equine assisted activities work. Very few refereed journals carry comparative research results of what makes therapeutic riding beneficial, or even what aspects of the activity are most effective (such as the length of time, frequency, type of horse best suited for these programs, types of disabilities best served, or individual case studies). Considering that there are over 670 NARHA centers serving an average of 50 riders or participants throughout the nation (Fall, 2002 *NARHA’s Strides*), we have very little documented “proof” that what we do works, or what about it works best!

J. Warren Evans (October 1995 *NARHA’s Strides*) points out that while treatment with the use of a horse was first written about in 1870, articles regarding therapeutic riding for cerebral palsy began to appear only in the 1970’s. He states that individuals in Germany pioneered early publications. One of the first complete scientific research studies was written in 1988 by Dolores Bertoti in the journal *Physical Therapy*. Interestingly, this article is most often cited as “proof” that equine assisted activities work. Another research article, written by Barb Brock, appeared in 1988 in the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*. Since that time, more studies have been conducted and presented at professional conferences, both nationally and internationally. But very little is published, except in proceedings! The paucity of available documented research is disheartening!

## **Who Cares?**

Many professions are affected by the industry that comprises equine assisted activities – veterinarians, farriers, breeds specialists, riding instructors, occupational therapists, physical therapists, recreation therapists, speech therapists, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, administrators, fund raisers, marketing experts, parents, teachers, special educators, mental health specialists, social workers, and many more. Looking at the professional journals that have carried articles (see side bar), one gets an idea of who is doing the research and on what topics. Hooray for physical therapy! However, since our industry is made up of so many different professions, should we not see studies in all areas?

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The need for research has been suggested in several articles in *NARHA’s Strides* (McGibbon, 1997; Aisenbrey, 2000; and Macauley, 2002). In a survey conducted by the Research Sub-Committee at the Seattle 2001 NARHA Conference, the question regarding which aspects of therapeutic riding most needed research was raised. Responses included the following:

- Ideas on how to handle different situations in equine assisted activities, so that we may all have safer lessons and learn from one another.
- Specific benefits of equine facilitated psychotherapy for a variety of diagnoses, so that data may support effectiveness to the public and financial supporters.

- Reach more medical professionals, so that a greater number of individuals with disabilities may learn about the benefits of equine assisted activities.
- Provide scientific evidence of the specific benefits of horse assisted activities, so that specific, measurable goals make programs more amenable to outcomes assessment processes. This would have wide ranging benefits, such as attracting schools, enable program improvement, and enhance grant writing.
- Consider the connection between people and their core issues and certain horses, so that one's ability to focus and remain engaged is enhanced through work with the horse.
- Compare hippotherapy with other forms of treatment, so that comparative success with hippotherapy can be documented leading to "proof" and recognition.
- Determine what outcomes measures are most meaningful for a riding instructor to track, so that a national database could be developed to document changes effected by participating in a therapeutic riding program.

### **A Clearing House for Research?**

Although I am personally aware of several studies conducted as part of thesis work through universities, there is no central clearinghouse or compilation of these studies. If they are not published, they don't truly exist! Why? Because no one knows about the process or their results if nothing is published! This leaves our industry in a quandary of splendid intentions, but very little proof!

There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Many of the professionals involved with hippotherapy and therapeutic horseback riding as well as equine facilitated psychotherapy are putting their heads together. A research symposium was held at the 2000 NARHA Annual Conference in Minnesota. Six research studies were presented at the 2002 NARHA Annual Conference in Virginia. Research was presented from several perspectives: Physical therapy, Occupational therapy, Human Biology, Cognition and Psychology. We have a long way to go to build the body of evidence needed for funding, for recognition within the medical and psychological community, and for "proof" that **it** works! But we are making progress!

*For a more extensive fact sheet on how to conduct research please email [narha@narha.org](mailto:narha@narha.org), or order this document from the Fax On Demand system at (303) 252-4610.*

### **Steps in the research process:**

- Identify the problem or question.
- Review the literature.
- Form the questions or hypothesis.
- Design a protocol that will answer the question.
- Carry out the protocol.
- Collect and interpret the findings.
- Publish the answer so others may benefit.

(*AHA News*, Spring 2001)

### **Refereed or juried publications that have published research studies:**

- Physiotherapy Canada
- Therapeutic Recreation Journal
- Pediatric Physical Therapy
- Physical Therapy
- Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics
- Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology
- Developmental Disabilities Special Interest Section Quarterly – AOTA
- Journal of the American Veterinary Medicine Association
- Rehabilitation
- Proceedings of the International Congress on Therapeutic Riding

### **Non-juried publications that have published research studies:**

- Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly
- Advance for Occupational Therapy
- Advance for Physical Therapy
- American Hippotherapy News
- NARHA Strides
- People, Animals, Environment
- Dissertation Abstracts International

Kathy Splinter-Watkins is an Associate Professor in Occupational Therapy at Eastern Kentucky University. She has served on the NARHA Health and Education Committee, the Research Sub-Committee, and has recently been elected to the American Hippotherapy Association Board. Kathy has been involved in therapeutic riding for 21 years, and now resides on their thoroughbred farm in Paris, KY, with her husband. E-mail:

[Triadfarms@aol.com](mailto:Triadfarms@aol.com)

References:

- Aisenbrey, J. (2000, Summer). But does it really work? *NARHA Strides*: 6, 26.
- Bertoti, D.B. (1988). Effect of therapeutic horseback riding on posture in children with cerebral palsy. *Physical Therapy*: 68, 1505-1512.
- Brock, B.J. (1988). Effect of therapeutic horseback riding on physically disabled adults. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*: 22, 34-42.
- Evans, J.W. (1995, October). Cerebral palsy and therapeutic riding: A review of relevant literature. *NARHA Strides*: 1, 27-28.
- Macauley, B.L. (2002, Fall). More research in the field? *NARHA Strides*: 8, 35.
- McGibbon, N.H. (1997, October). The need for research. *NARHA Strides*: 3, 32.
- Scebbi, W.J. (2002, Fall). Let's keep our focus. *NARHA Strides*: 8, 35.
- Splinter-Watkins, K.L. (2001, Spring). Research forum. *AHA News*: 10, 1&4.