

Experiences and perceptions of physical and rehabilitative therapies for horses and ponies in New Zealand

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Introduction

Equine physical and rehabilitative therapies are growing in popularity and are performed by veterinarians, professionally recognised therapists, and laypeople. In New Zealand, equine industry participants' perceptions of efficacy, and professional involvement or collaboration influences on outcome are not known. This study aimed to identify which equine rehabilitative services in New Zealand are used and why, who provides them, and their contribution to equine health and welfare.

Materials and methods

An online cross-sectional survey was developed and distributed to New Zealanders that own, train or work with horses or ponies professionally and/or recreationally and had at least one horse for which they organised therapy during the three years prior to completing the survey. Respondents were asked about their involvement and experience in the industry and rehabilitative therapies, the rehabilitation of one horse or pony over the last three years, their perceptions of the response to the treatment or therapy, and their level of satisfaction. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses were performed.

Results

The 362 respondents were predominantly female (93%). Most females were 46 – 50 years and males 66 years or older. The most common breeds described were Thoroughbreds and their crosses (27%), and Warmbloods and their crosses (26%). Predominant disciplines represented included dressage (23%) and recreational or non-competitive riding (22%). The most frequently used therapy was massage therapy (73%). Predominant reasons for soliciting therapy were injury or soreness of the back, neck or pelvis (28%) and limbs (27%); 17% of respondents used these therapies for general health and welfare. Only 1% of respondents used rehabilitative therapies for recovery following surgery. Qualified veterinary therapists most frequently provided the therapies (36%); 25% of providers were qualified human therapists. Performance or activity was perceived by 81% as higher or the same, and 93% were satisfied overall with treatment. Strength and conditioning training was positively associated with outcome ($p=0.003$); controlled exercise programmes ($p=0.002$) and fortnightly chiropractic treatment ($p=0.038$) were negatively associated. The amount spent on therapy did not correlate with a positive outcome. Collaboration between the veterinarian and the rehabilitation providers was important for 81% of respondents (strongly by 58%).

Discussion and conclusions

This study showed an increase in utilisation of physical and rehabilitative therapies, when compared with previous New Zealand studies. The

predominant rehabilitative service used was massage or trigger point therapy, compared to chiropractic therapy nine years ago. The reasons for using these services were similar to other studies, but the use of rehabilitative services for general health and welfare was a new finding. As only 1% used these therapies for post-surgical recovery, there is a need to better understand the role of veterinarians in selecting post-surgical recovery strategies.

Qualified veterinary therapists were the main providers of rehabilitative services. This differs from previous studies and may indicate an increased awareness of qualified service providers in this field. However, it is unclear what respondents recognise as a qualification, so the precise role of professional involvement on rehabilitation outcomes is uncertain. The use of a professionally qualified service provider was perceived as having a positive influence on outcome, but the specific qualifications as less important. The use of qualified human therapists is interesting; further investigation regarding specific qualifications is warranted.

Strength and conditioning training were positively associated with perceived outcome. Less positive outcomes following treatment incurred greater costs and more positive outcomes incurred lower total costs. This, along with injury type or severity, may have been influential in the greater proportion of horses or ponies being retired/spelled indefinitely, as opposed to returning to a lower level of performance or activity. Definitive reasons for these associations are unclear.

Results from this study may help decision-making and assist future research regarding specific qualifications of rehabilitation providers, outcome measures, and treatment efficacy.

Selected references

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