

Statement from the Australian Physiotherapy Association on animal physiotherapy

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) supports the vital role of animal physiotherapists and calls on veterinarians to refer to qualified allied health professionals, to ensure the most appropriate and skilled treatment for all animals, whether they be high performance competitors or beloved family pets.

Preamble

Physiotherapy is not only for humans. Physiotherapy provides essential rehabilitation and treatment for animals to improve their quality of life and prevent injuries.

Animal physiotherapists work closely with veterinary surgeons in the treatment of animals. As with humans, physiotherapists help reduce pain, improve function and mobility in animals, and prevent recurrence of injury. They predominantly work with horses, dogs and cats; either with the beloved family pet, cattle, native or working animals, such as racehorses, show jumpers, and greyhounds.

Physiotherapists working with animals offer the same skills and multidisciplinary care as in human health care, resulting in better outcomes for animals following surgery and neurological events. These professionals also bring improved quality of life to elderly animals and those undergoing palliative treatment.

Physiotherapists working with racehorses, performance horses and agility dogs work to improve athletic performance in much the same way that high performance athletes are treated by sports physiotherapists.

In Australia, there are several paraprofessionals working within the animal rehabilitation sphere, as this is currently not a regulated industry within Australia. This means that there are services provided by paraprofessionals who are not as qualified as animal physiotherapists.

The APA is concerned that some animal practitioners claiming to be physiotherapists may hold no such degree or indeed any formal, recognised training. Consumers have a right to know that practitioners calling themselves physiotherapists are just that. They should be confident that they are receiving physiotherapy from a qualified professional who is providing the best care.

Animal owners can be assured that when qualified practitioners registered by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), such as physiotherapists, are consulted, they will deliver high-quality, expert treatment to their animals.

Recommendations

The APA calls on **veterinary surgeons** to:

- only refer clients to qualified allied health professionals, such as physiotherapists, to ensure the most appropriate and skilled treatment for all animals, whether they be high performance competitors or pets; and
- avoid confusion for consumers, and potential danger to animals, by discontinuing referrals to practitioners not registered with Ahpra.

The APA calls on **pet insurers** to:

- include animal physiotherapy cover in their policies; and
- provide policies that cover common complaints that animal physiotherapists normally treat.

The APA calls on **animal owners** to:

- carefully scrutinise all pet insurance policies to ensure they stipulate their pet or working animal will receive care from highly qualified, Ahpra-regulated physiotherapists; and
- check the Ahpra website for registration details to ensure properly qualified physiotherapists are providing treatment and care.

Position summary

The APA is aware of many instances in which practitioners claiming to perform physiotherapy on animals have no such qualification or skill.

Therefore the APA is calling on veterinary surgeons to only refer their clients, where needed, to qualified allied health professionals, to ensure the most appropriate and skilled treatment is provided for all animals.

Animal physiotherapists work closely with veterinarians, also farriers, equine and canine dentists and veterinary nurses, to deliver the best outcomes for their patients. They also work in small animal and equine specialist centres, university teaching hospitals and in private practice. Qualified physiotherapists who work with animals have specific training and knowledge in anatomy, physiology, biomechanics and pathology. Their expertise and qualifications must be recognised.

The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) is responsible for the implementation of the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme across Australia. They credential physiotherapists who treat animals, just as they do those working with people.

The APA wants pet insurers to provide animal physiotherapy cover in their policies.

Pet insurers should provide policies that cover common complaints that animal physiotherapists normally treat, such as cruciate ligament repair, hip dysplasia and intervertebral disc disease.

The APA also urges pet owners to carefully scrutinise the services that are offered in pet insurance policies, and to look for insurance policies that include not only physiotherapy treatment, but specifically, physiotherapy which is provided by qualified animal physiotherapists.

Insurance

There is vast variation in pet policy premiums, depending on breed, pre-existing conditions and age, and too many pet owners are not aware of the quality and expertise that might be covered in these policies.

The APA recommends all pet owners carefully scrutinise pet insurance policies and ask whether the insurance stipulates the pet or working animal will receive care from highly qualified, Ahpra-regulated physiotherapists.

The APA further cautions pet and horse owners to be careful of misleading wording within animal insurance policies, whereby a “qualified physiotherapist” is permitted to treat animals, but a veterinarian can also provide physiotherapy; often a veterinary nurse. This is a misuse of the professional title and implies that ‘physiotherapy’ is a technique or procedure.



If you are unsure if your pet is being treated by a qualified physiotherapist, owners can check on the Ahpra website for registration details.

Background

Animal physiotherapy was first practised in 1939 when Lord Louis Mountbatten asked the Royal physiotherapist, Sir Charles Strong, to treat his horses. As a profession, animal physiotherapy has continued to evolve, and the body of research for animal physiotherapy is rapidly growing.

Some human rehabilitation medicine and research into pain and the effects of modalities have relied on studies that utilise animals. Many models of surgery, including spinal surgery, use animal modelling. Much of what is done with physiotherapy for animals is extrapolated from human-based research.

Ahpra-registered physiotherapists have completed a four-year Bachelor of Science degree in Physiotherapy. Those working in animal physiotherapy have undertaken additional post-graduate training, and hold Masters or postgraduate diplomas in animal or veterinary physiotherapy. Additionally, they may have completed the APA's Career Pathway in Animal Physiotherapy.

All physiotherapists, whether they work solely with humans or also with animals, are bound by the APA's code of conduct and must meet Ahpra's stringent regulatory requirements.

According to Animal Medicines Australia there are almost 29 million pets in Australia - more than the estimated human population. Three in five Australian households (almost 6 million) have a pet, while 90 per cent of Australian households have had a pet at some time. Australians reportedly spend more than \$13 billion on pet-related products and services, of which 20 per cent goes on veterinary services and 11 per cent on health care products.