



Richard Moore

A young volunteer side walking at an RDA (Riding for the Disabled Association) session hears the first words the previously non-verbal six-year-old autistic rider speaks.

A spina bifida child that could not support their own weight takes their first independent steps after several weeks of hippotherapy.

A military veteran living with the torture of PTSD finds the ability to manage their anger for the first time.

An autistic teenager who decided life was not worth living lifts her first rosette in competition.

A head teacher who never touched a horse says this is the best therapy for his special needs pupils and wishes it could be extended to all 700 pupils in his school.

These things all happened in Northern Ireland.

On a Texas horse ranch, a famous brain surgeon trains young doctors to read body language to better communicate with traumatised patients.

In a U.S. prison, a violent young inmate is taught how to gain the trust of a mustang; two terrified creatures learn a new way of living.

I had developed a fledgling interest in the field of equine assisted activities (EAA) to benefit human wellbeing a few years ago. For once, Northern Ireland seemed to have some advantages.

The analogy of a jigsaw came to mind. You have many pieces but know some are missing, and you don't have the box lid to give the finished picture. In developing the diverse field of EAA, I think we have a greater proportion of the pieces than most other parts of the world; a riding stables infrastructure that may be struggling but is at least intact, innovative equine colleges of a high calibre, a large sports horse population meaning that many of the costs of keeping animals are already 'found', and relatively easy access to rural geography in spite of burgeoning urbanisation.



When horses help humans

Richard Moore, who spoke recently to those attending the NIVA AGM at Dunadry, believes that Northern Ireland could well become a centre for excellence for equine-assisted therapy and learning.

A few of us now share a vision that Northern Ireland could aspire to be a Centre of Excellence in all aspects of equine-assisted activities for human wellbeing. This is a vision that is equally applicable, and from many conversations with like-minded people, universally shared in the Republic of Ireland.

So why the horse (and donkey)?

The best illustration I know of how these creatures can bring huge benefit when incorporated in therapeutic and learning activities is to consider their two principal roles: one as a living apparatus and the other as a divine mirror.

The living apparatus refers to the use of the horse's natural walking gait to provide motor and sensory input to the rider with physical challenges.

Physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists have utilised this 'apparatus' in their practices for decades.

Their skilled manipulation of the horse's movement and the equine environment allows them to engage the human body's sensory, neuromotor and cognitive systems to achieve functional goals.

The horse takes approximately 100 strides per minute, so in a 30-minute session, the client will experience 3000 sensory and neuromotor inputs through their body. This sets the basis for functional learning, stimulates muscle strengthening and coordination and provides sensory processing benefits. The horse's movement is multi-dimensional, rhythmic, consistent, predictable and repetitive. Even a 30-minute session allows the rider lots of opportunity to practise and refine balance responses, improve core stability and improve postural control.

A skilled therapist who knows their horses can modify the animal's movement to stimulate and challenge the client. By altering speed, tempo,



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direction and position of the rider, the therapist can alter how the movement influences the client. Hence the need for animals that are sound, trainable and reliable. Therapists and RDA groups certainly appreciate gifts of suitable animals, but they are not a home for cast-offs.

Hippotherapy (there is a wide and possibly confusing range of nomenclature internationally) is particularly effective in the paediatric population, with those on the autistic spectrum, with cerebral palsy and Downs Syndrome sufferers. There is a body of research supporting the observations of children being more open to learning when participating in equine activities. The production of oxytocin is thought to be central in this, while research into the neuroplasticity of the brain, particularly in development, supports theories of the benefit of the horse's movement.

This movement has not been duplicated by any equipment to date.

The Divine Mirror is a rather grand way of describing the horse's incorporation in therapy and learning for its unique ability to simply always be a horse. This is not about trained horses; on the contrary, it is the utilisation of the horse's two principal and ever-present drivers of behaviour – being a prey and a herd animal. The horse is fundamentally insecure in nature, without ego, authentic (a horse does not use deceit as a hunting animal would), uses body language as its principal means of communication and has no speech to corrupt

that communication. It is non-judgemental and highly sensitive to its environment. The horse gives immediate feedback - it detects emotions and reflects them instantly. In short, horses do not - indeed cannot - separate how they feel from how they act. Hence the divine mirror analogy.

When a skilled coach, psychotherapist or counsellor has access to the information that the horse reflects about the client, new possibilities for communication and connection occur. The horse is said to 'let you in' to the relationship with the client, providing a bridge. This is especially valuable in work with vulnerable young people who may choose not to communicate in traditional therapeutic settings. For psychotherapists and coaches dealing with trauma, stress, PTSD, phobias and other mental conditions, the horse's feedback may be the only information available.

While 'apparatus' and 'mirror' are useful terms in explaining the horse's roles in therapy and learning, these roles overlap substantially in practice. Without exception we hear parents, teachers, therapists and coaches speak about the whole person when speaking of the benefits of EAA.

This field is diverse, can appear complicated due to the plethora of terms and bodies involved, but is an exciting, and I contend, much needed area for development to benefit both horse and human.

If you would like to learn more, I am unlikely to be able to answer your questions in detail,

but I should know someone who can.

You can contact me at: richard@moorehome.co or on 07710 333142.

For a list (not exhaustive) of practitioners in NI, see <https://www.vetni.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/List-of-EAT-practitioners.pdf>

Richard retired from a career in the meat industry in 2016 having been managing director of two major NI companies. He also chaired two trade bodies, the NI Meat Exporters Association and the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association. From an amateur interest in horses and a meeting with Temple Grandin, the prominent autism spokesperson, Richard developed a curiosity about equine-assisted therapy and learning (EAT&L). He has read widely about animal-human, and particularly horse-human relationships and volunteers at a local RDA group. Richard now commits time, energy and money to support the development of EAT&L locally, and believes that NI is well-placed to become a centre of excellence in these disciplines. He is currently on the boards of NOW Group, a social enterprise supporting people with learning difficulties and autism, and Re-Gen Waste Ltd., a local waste management and recycling company. Both organisations have been very supportive of the fledgling initiatives in EAT&L.