

Who can “do” Hippotherapy?

By Judy Todd, PT, AHA Level 2 Therapist

Hippotherapy is a medical treatment utilizing the movement of the horse; the key word is *medical*. It requires the ability to make an assessment and a diagnosis (if required) and then to develop a treatment program with specific outcomes. As such, Hippotherapy lies solely within the scope of practice of a Physiotherapist (PT), Occupational Therapist (OT) or Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) who has received additional specialized training in Hippotherapy. Currently, Hippotherapy educational standards in North America are set by the American Hippotherapy Association.

In addition to taking the required Hippotherapy training, a PT, OT or SLP who wish to practice Hippotherapy must be licensed with their provincial College and carry appropriate malpractice insurance.

The AHA does make an initial Hippotherapy course available to all-comers who may wish to assist a Hippotherapy professional. Qualified PT and OT assistants who have taken this introductory course can also “do” Hippotherapy, but only under the immediate direction and supervision of a qualified PT or OT; the assistants cannot assess a client or design a treatment plan.

Does this then exclude a doctor, kinesiologist or nurse, all of whom have a strong movement background, from having a Hippotherapy practice or working in one?

A doctor has extensive medical training and, in a Hippotherapy setting, are very much a referral source and part of a Hippotherapy team along with the therapist and horse expert. However, a doctor acts only in an advisory or consulting capacity.

A kinesiologist studies human anatomy and movement in depth but their training does not cover the medical treatment of clients such as the neurologically impaired in any way. While a kinesiologist may well be a valued member of a therapist-led Hippotherapy team they are not licensed to actively treat.

A nurse also studies anatomy but lacks the depth of biomechanics and movement and is not registered to treat clients with varying diagnoses in either a Hippotherapy or rehab setting.

The American Hippotherapy Association has come a long way in their 22 years and the prerequisites for their upper level courses make it very clear that PTs, OTs and SLPs are the professionals to offer Hippotherapy. As mentioned earlier, an introductory course is available to all-comers, but the advanced training is only open to these three professions.

Hippotherapy Canada is not a regulatory body and has no control over anyone advertising their “Hippotherapy” skills. A number of people offering the service, while they may have some horses, in fact lack all qualifications in what is a very specialized field. We urge anyone considering taking Hippotherapy to use caution.