

**A survey of 'equine-assisted intervention' programmes and welfare implications in the Veneto region (Italy)**

*Martin, S.<sup>1</sup>, Meers, L.<sup>1</sup>, Normando, S.<sup>2</sup>, Samuels, W.E.<sup>3</sup> and Ödberg, F.O.<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>Ghent University, Laboratory for Ethology, Heidestraat 19, 9820 Merelbeke, Belgium, <sup>2</sup>Università di Padova, Dipartimento di Scienze Sperimentali Veterinari, Viale dell Università, 35020 Agripolis Legnaro, Italy, <sup>3</sup>CUNY, College of Staten Island, Victory Boulevard, Staten Island New York, USA; [lieve@therapiemetdieren.be](mailto:lieve@therapiemetdieren.be)*

Equine-assisted interventions (EAIs) include equine-assisted activities (EAAs), equine-assisted therapy (EATs), and equine-assisted learning (EAL). The Veneto region is one of the few in the world endeavouring to control these programmes by law. The purpose of this study was to gather information on selection, training, working conditions, and welfare of horses employed in EAIs conducted at riding stables in Veneto, identify possible welfare problems, assess whether there are gender differences relating to horse selection and reaction to people with challenges. Out of 144 riding stables, 83 (58%) were reached and 72 were participating in the survey. Thirty-one (37%) of the riding stables and 26 (36%) of the respondents reported conducting EATs. Seventeen (55%) of the 26 stables that initially declared organizing EATs completed the survey. Nine (52%) have a therapist present (EATs); four (24%) yards work with doctors, but they are not present; and four (24%) allege to conduct EATs, but do not meet requirements. The 14 yards conducting EAIs employed a total of 88 equids (39 mares, 49 geldings). Eighty five percent of the EAIs focus on people with disabilities. Nine (52%) followed a course in 'hippotherapy'. Only 14% of EAI equids received preliminary training. Equids were mainly selected by temperament (94%) and breed (42%). More male respondents considered age to be an important criterion than did female respondents ( $P=0.004$ ). No yard deemed previous veterinary examinations necessary. All horses are regularly vaccinated and wormed. Retirement age varies depending on health. Workload varies from <20 minutes to 4 hours per session, the latter in EAT sessions, from 1 to 6 days a week. Individual boxes are the most common housing (64%), some (14%) are turned out for a couple of hours a week, and some (22%) have a box with free access to a field. The public has no access to the stables in 7 (41%) yards. Horses have free access to water in 8 yards (47%), food is in all stables available at specific moments, and only 1 (5%) yard provides environmental enrichment. No yards systematically assess possible discomfort or stress. Six (35%) yards report dangerous behaviours (e.g. running away, some bucking, or minor biting) toward clients.

Although the Veneto Law was passed to improve welfare of horses and clients, it does not seem to have been consistently implemented. This warrants further investigation. Practitioners should be aware of the importance of systematically monitoring and ensuring welfare in EAI.