

How did I become an Animal Physical Therapist?

I get asked this question a lot by many young people and others who are thinking of changing careers, therefore I decided to write this article to answer that question.

Animal Physical Therapy is becoming one of the fastest growing professions in our country. The problem is that the educational processes behind such demands are slow to adapt to this growing need. Although at the time of this writing, there is no “formal” education of Equine or Animal PT in the United States, have no fear of pursuit, if this is something you are passionate about. It is worth your pursuits. The laws and educational facilities are just a little slow at catching on, but soon, I anticipate there will be a Master’s level educational program developed, and it will be very competitive to get into, due to the high interest of people such as yourself. If you are animal lover, what is better than being able to work with animals to regain their health and function and be paid for it! Nothing in my book. It is a hugely rewarding field, whether it is with humans or animals. There are really two tracts of study for you to consider when thinking about becoming an animal therapist. Veterinarian medicine or Physical therapy.

Physical Therapy is a protected term, stating that the art, skill and professional practice of physical therapy, can only be performed by someone who has a license in Physical Therapy, of which one has to sit for a board exam and pass. After passing a licensure exam, one needs to stay active in continuing their education to maintain their license. Each state varies the regulations of what that may be, along with an annual renewal fee.

Physical Therapy (PT) programs currently require about 6- 7 years of college. Often they consist of a 3 and 3 year programming. The first 3 years focus on basic requirements and many sciences. The second 3 years focus on PT approaches and integration into clinic hands-on instructional experiences. And yes, most of it is human based. Some programs may offer an Animal Rehab special topics course in your last year, but do not count on it.

Therefore, for now going to an accredited PT college program is the only way to go, if you wish to come out with the letters “PT” after your name and consider yourself a licensed professional. By attending 6 years of PT school you will come out with a thorough knowledge of physiology, neurology, physics, biology, pathology, how all the various body systems function, and how to best heal structures based on evidence based research.

Or the other route is to pursue a DVM degree by going to vet school, which is usually 8 + years of education. Once you are a DVM, you can pretty much touch and treat any animal in your area of specialty after licensure is achieved. In vet school you will be taught about diseases, medicine, surgical intervention, euthanasia and a whole lot more, but probably NOT a lot about therapeutic interventions such as manual healing techniques, how to reteach motor control (functional movement) and the finite details about coordination, etc. Those are really more in the specialty of physical therapy.

So back to how to become an Animal Physical Therapist. I went to PT school many years ago. Funny side note here is that as a kid I always thought about becoming a vet. I chose not to go that route due to my high school experience of being more a B student as opposed to an A student, lack of self confidence, and realization that 8 years of school sounding awfully loong when I was 17. *(Little did I know how competitive PT school was at the time! And it still is I believe currently. So work hard and do not lose sight of what you want. **If you want it bad enough it, it may take a few tries, but keep trying.** You will get there, and gain some good life experience along the way.)* Now when I look back as to how much time and money I have spent on my education to get to where I am today, I could have gone to Vet school by now. But oh well, it is the ride that makes us who we are, not the end product. I am very happy being an Animal PT and no regrets as to not to have gone to Vet school. However, I do wish I had had more faith in my level of perseverance at the time of 18....but who is to know at 18. This is all hindsight of 20/20.

I became a human PT in 1985 and have practiced for many years. At the turn of the recent century, year 2000, I thought, “why not put my professional skills to work with my hobby, love of animals, and start treating them with the methods I know so well to heal humans?” So I started my pursuit of equine rehab education. Not easy to come by. I did lots of reading and research. I took a home study course offered by the APTA on comparative anatomy of the canine and equine. I found other horse courses that I could. I later went on to receive my equine rehab certification (CERP) through the Un. of Tennessee and North East Seminars in 2005- 2006. The website is http://equinerehab.utk.edu/index_certificate.php/ Dr. Steve Adair is the program director at sadair@utk.edu . He is very friendly guy. He also has an impressive faculty line up including yours truly, so make your interests known. I opened my private practice of Equine Rehab Services in 2006. Later I went back to Un. Of Tenn in 2010 to acquire my second certification in Canine Rehab. In June 2012, I opened Horse N Hound Physical Therapy with the help of my husband, family members and two great employees.

So your education is one challenge you need to address, but here is the next one > your state laws. Not all states allow anyone other than veterinarians to lay hands on animals. Each state is different and many of us heralding-the-way in this newly developing field are pursuing the legislation to change the laws with in our own state. If you are interested in how we addressed the law with in my state of NH please Google “NH HB 1525”. Other states that have passed animal PT laws are Colorado, Nevada, along with MD, and NJ as up and coming states that are currently under legislative changes. Each state has to change their laws (we call them Practice Acts) under their own terms. Do not let that scare you, laws are up for change all the time. It just takes a few PT “movers and shakers” to collaborate with interested and supportive DVMs to work on changing the laws. The DVMs are now realizing the value of how PT can improve their client’s outcome, that reflect back positively on them as the referral source.

I hope that helps? It is not an easy road, but one worth traveling. If I can help you out with any further answers to your questions, do not hesitate to ask.

Best of travels, enjoy the ride!

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