

## Equine-assisted intervention programs in Veneto (Italy)

*Normando S.<sup>1,2</sup>, Meers L.<sup>2,3</sup>, Salvadorette M.<sup>1</sup>, Trevisan C.<sup>1</sup>, Samuels W.E.<sup>4</sup> and Ödberg F.O.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Padua University, Dipartimento di Scienze Sperimentali Veterinarie, Legnaro (PD), Italy

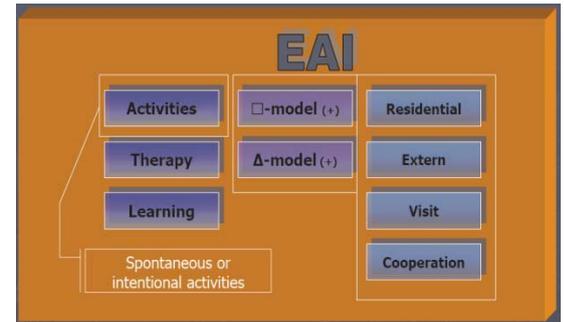
<sup>2</sup>University College Ghent, Faculty of Biosciences and Landscape Architecture, Melle, Belgium

<sup>3</sup>Ghent University, Department of Nutrition, Genetics, and Ethology, Merelbeke, Belgium

<sup>4</sup>City University of New York, College of Staten Island NY, USA

### INTRODUCTION

- Equine-assisted interventions (EAI) involve *equidae* in activities (EAA), therapy (EAT), education & learning (EAE/L) to promote well-being of clients (Samuels et al., 2006):
  - Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) denotes that client oriented therapeutic goals are set and progress records are kept
  - Equine-assisted activities (EAA) are programs without specific goals for each client
  - Equine-assisted learning/education (EAE/L) includes educational goals for each student



**This study:** to gather information on EAIs in Veneto and identify possible welfare problems

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

- A semi-structured survey consisted out of 67 questions concerning following topics: selection, training, working conditions, and equine welfare
- Respondents: seventy-two (64%) stables, out of 112 whose participation was solicited by phone, completed the survey

### RESULTS

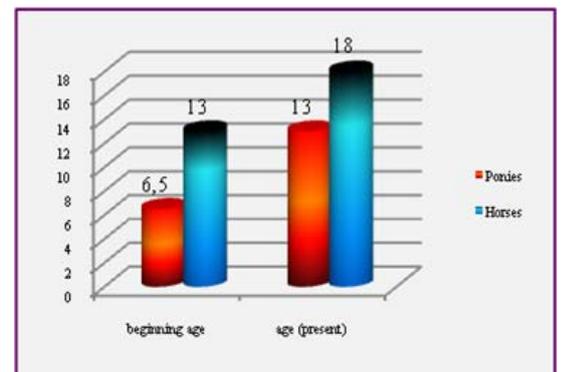
Eighteen (25%) yards organize EAIs with a total of 76 horses/ponies. Seventeen (24%) involve a therapist out of which 11 (15%) with a psychologist and can hence be considered to be EAT.

All yards select kind and quiet horses for EAIs. **None deem a veterinary examination necessary** prior to inclusion. All horses are regularly vaccinated and de-wormed (which is compulsory in Italy). Age is never the main selection criterion. However, ponies tend to start at a younger age (6,5 versus 13 years,  $Z=-3.7$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Mann-Whitney-U), and to be younger during the EAIs (13 years vs. 18;  $Z=-4.3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Mann-Whitney-U) than horses. Retirement age varies depending on health.

Thirty-six (47%) of the horses/ponies worked in EAIs for more than 5 years. Although working conditions in EAIs are very diverse, **none of the horses receive** --on top of regular training as saddle horse/pony-- **specific training**, apart from 6 (8%) yards, which habituate horses to EAI stimuli. Workload varies from 1 to 10 30-minute sessions/horse/week. In 17 (24%) yards, the same animals also work as riding school horses.

All horses are housed in individual stables. Horses have free access to a paddock in two (3%) yards. In 12 (17%), access is restricted to part of the day. The public has no access to the stables/paddocks in 9 (12.5%) yards.

**Possible discomfort or stress is never systematically assessed.** Increased latency in obeying aids, disobedience, stopping, mild bucking are the most frequently reported **problems**. Nine (12.5%) yards report **aggressive reactions** (threats through flattening ears, vocalising, backing) towards some clients.



### CONCLUSION

These results constitute **sources of concern and warrant further investigation.**

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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