

Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation: A Global Phenomenon. Where Are We Headed Now?

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Keywords: Veterinary Sports Medicine, Animal Rehabilitation, Physiotherapy.

1. A brief history of the field

Human physiotherapy began during World War 1, when tens of thousands of troops were returning home injured and in need of care. At the same time, there was a resurgence of polio cases worldwide. The U.S. military created 3-month programs to educate 'Reconstruction Aides' also called Re-Aides. Re-Aides applied many techniques to restore physical function, including electrical stimulation, massage, manual therapies, muscle re-education, and therapeutic exercise (Hesbach *et al.*, 2025). The success of the Re-Aides led to creation of the field of physiotherapy. Education standards progressed from certification programs to bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and finally to today's standards in which all physiotherapists graduate with a doctorate, requiring 4 years of undergraduate training followed by 3-4 years of post-graduate training.

Equine rehabilitation began in the 1960's in Europe. Ann Downer published the first text on physical therapy for animals in 1978. Canine and equine rehabilitation became mainstream in Europe and the U.K. in the 1980's. The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy (ACPAT) was established in the U.K. in 1985 and currently has over 375 members.

Canine and equine rehabilitation in the U.S.A. began in the 1990's and early 2000's, with certification programs starting in 1997. Debbie Gross Saunders published *Canine Physical Therapy* in 2001. At that time, veterinary colleges offered very little information on rehabilitation, and physiotherapy colleges offered no animal rehabilitation education.

In the 1990's the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) developed guidelines regarding the practice of veterinary/animal rehabilitation. The Animal Physical Therapy Special Interest Group (APT-SIG) was established in 1997, and certification programs to train veterinarians and physios began the same year.

The 2003 AVMA Model Practice Act addressed the growing interest in animal rehabilitation. In 2004 the state of Nevada passed legislation creating a certification process allowing physios to practice animal rehabilitation. PT's must complete additional training and register with the Nevada State Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners. The success of this legislation caused the American Association of Veterinary State Boards (AAVSB) to mirror this practice act in the 2005 Model Practice Act. The APTA then published a position statement

acknowledging that its members could practice animal rehabilitation 'where allowed by law and regulation.'

In 2007, the state of Colorado passed legislation defining the working relationship between veterinarians and physiotherapists with additional training in animal rehabilitation. Key provisions of this act included the definition of *veterinary medical clearance*, the educational requirements for physios wishing to become registered to practice animal rehabilitation, and the requirements for registration and ongoing record sharing between the physio and the veterinarian of record.

2. The Current Situation Around the Globe

2007 also saw the formation of the American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians (AARV). This organization has a current membership of 447, including veterinarians, physios, veterinary nurses, interns/residents, and students. The APT-SIG has 330 active members, all physios and physio interns/residents and students. They completed an in-depth practice analysis in 2019 to assess how physios are practicing in animal rehabilitation throughout the U.S. and Canada. Further studies are being developed.

U.S.-Based Certification programs continue to expand their offerings. The University of Tennessee program, run by NorthEast Seminars (NES) began in 1997. The program separated from NES in 2023 and is now run by Veterinary Academy of Higher Learning (VAHL). Canine Rehabilitation Institute began in 2002, holds courses in the U.S., Belgium, and Australia, and has over 2000 successful graduates. The Healing Oasis, began rehabilitation training in 2016. All courses are held in Wisconsin. North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine began a certification program in 2023, run by NES.

These certification programs are not recognized academic degrees, but all listed here are recognised by the American Association of State Boards' (AAVSB) Registry of Approved Continuing Education (RACE), widely recognized for assuring high standards of veterinary education.

Board Certification is available through the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation (ACVSMR) which was established in 2010 and received full accreditation through the American Board of Veterinary Specialists (ABVS) in 2017. The College held annual lecture tracks in conjunction with the American College of Veterinary Surgeons until COVID. It recently began holding independent conferences (2023 through 2025). The College currently has 299 diplomates (127 canine and 171 equine) and will convene its next conference in March 2026 in Lexington, Kentucky. www.vsmr.org.

The European College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation was established in 2017 and received full accreditation by the European Board of Veterinary Specialists (EBVS) in 2025. The College currently has 93 diplomates in 20 countries (66 equine and 27 canine) and 22 active residencies (8 canine and 14 equine).

The International Association of Veterinary Rehabilitation and Physical Therapy (IAVRPT) was established in 1999 and held its first bi-annual conference in Oregon in 2000. The most recent conference took place in Cape Town, South Africa in 2024, and the next conference

will be in the U.S. in 2026. The organization currently has 313 full members, 29 associate members, and 29 students, representing 39 countries.

The Australian New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists has a Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation Chapter that was established in 2020 with its inaugural meeting held in December of that year. The Chapter has had a presence at Science Week (workshops, lecture tracks, and collaboration with other Chapters) every year since 2021. Membership has grown steadily, with a current roster of 43 members. This number is anticipated to go up as the Equine Membership Examination is held in June of this year. The Canine Membership Examination will take place in 2026.

What is happening in Australia today?

Universities: Canine rehabilitation training: U. Sydney: DACVSMR on staff but focused on surgery. U. Adelaide: Occasional lectures. U. Melbourne: Nothing? Murdoch U.: ?. U. QLD: Refer cases to Leslie Goff, physio/ACPAT. Equine rehabilitation training: Murdoch has an equine DACVSMR on staff starting in 2025. U. QLD: training ACVSMR residents.

Private Practice: SASH has 3 DACVSMR's. Animal Referral Hospital in Canberra has one DACVSMR and one resident.

Human physios working with animals: Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA), Australian and New Zealand Animal and Veterinary Physiotherapy Association.

3. What is the future of VSMR?

Future trends show increasing public demand for these services. Additionally, veterinary and physio students are demanding more exposure to this field. Industry members (manufacturers and distributors of VSMR equipment) recognize great growth, and the ACVSMR, ECVSMR, and ANZCVS all show growing interest and growth trends.

Future Trends: Public Demand. Much of the demand for canine sports medicine and rehabilitation is driven by the growing interest in canine sporting events, with increasing registrations in established sports and the development of new sports, many aimed at pet dog participation. Similar growth is being seen in equine sporting events and the subsequent drive for sports medicine and rehabilitation services. Public demand is also driven by increasing pet ownership and an increasingly aged pet population. As the public becomes increasingly aware of the options available to them in the field of veterinary medicine, revenue is projected to grow by 2.4% year over year with the 2025 global revenue for this field estimated at \$6.94 billion (USD).

Future Trends: Veterinary students demanding more exposure to VSMR. Most veterinary colleges in the U.S. and Europe offer didactic training in VSMR as well as clinical rotations, though most of these are elective rather than required training. Colorado State University's College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences has initiated a model that is now being adopted by many other veterinary teaching hospitals and private practices: The *Mobility Service* that sees all incoming patients with musculoskeletal disorders. Those that are straightforward surgical candidates are transferred to the orthopedics service. The rest

are worked up and treated by the Mobility Service, freeing up the surgical staff to remain where they are most efficient: In the operating theater.

Future Trends: Equipment manufacturers and certification training programs: As shown previously, these industry leaders are witnessing excellent growth that is anticipated to continue well into the future.

Australia's Veterinary Market: According to the International Business Information Service, Australian veterinary revenue has grown at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 3.5% over the past five years, to reach an estimated \$5.6bn in 2024.

Companion Animal Rehabilitation Services Market Analysis and Forecast

The global companion animal rehabilitation services market size was valued at USD 499.7 million in 2022 and is anticipated to expand at a CAGR of 11.42% from 2023 to 2030. This would suggest that the Australian University veterinary colleges will need to begin to add VSMR to their curriculum soon.

References

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