THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND ANIMAL: THE IMPORTANCE OF PET THERAPY REVEALED DURING THE SYMPOSIUM

Many important topics have been covered during the much awaited medical scientific symposium that started the 2012 edition of Garda Endurance Cup. The conference took place in the Aula 1.1 of the Polo Zanotto at the University of Verona and was attended by experts and professionals in the field who have long been using animals in the treatment, assistance and rehabilitation of people with pathologies. The speakers supported their arguments by illustrating a number of cases and experiments that have been able to confirm, better than any other theory, the importance of the assistance of dogs, horses and other animal friends of man in dealing with the most various pathologies.

In a room crowded with experts in the field, students and curious onlookers, Prof. Angelo Lascioli opened what was destined to become the main appointment of the event. Lascioli opened the conference by framing the concept of hippotherapy: “Whether disability is the result of the interaction between health factors on one hand and social factors linked to the environment on the other hand, hippotherapy is something that fits in between, a solution to problems that go beyond health. Not only does it try to help people with disabilities to recover but also to value and respect themselves in everyday life.”

Dr. Lino Cavedon, psychotherapist National Reference Centre, was the second speaker to take the floor: "I approached the world of Pet therapy out of necessity. I felt that in many situations related to my work, the tools available were not enough to help people to open up to others in terms of relationships. A dog, as well as any other animal, helps to close the gaps, eliminates the presence of the desk between the doctor and the patient, is not evocative of the trauma, being an element of instant communication. At the moment there is no legislation to govern this sector, there are only indicators suggested by experience and here, in Veneto, we can boast of being in the forefront of this activity. The need to create a protocol is obvious when one tries to switch from processing related to theoretical or empirical Pet therapy and its clinical and scientific application on disorders, for example, related to the physical, neuro and psychomotor sphere. There are places like The Autism Centre of ULSS 20 in Verona where dogs are involved in the treatment of this pathology or like Cerris where animals live together with disabled patients obtaining excellent results in terms of psychological recovery.”

Dr. Mario Defranceschi, educator and director of the CIRS Trento (Italian Centre for social rehabilitation) shared his experience on the theme of “man-animal relationship in the interventions of Pet Therapy”, speaking mainly about the dog. Interacting with the public, Defranceschi tried to help the public to understand that man and dog are very different beings, have different habits and needs, and how man’s abusing behaviour has been the main cause of the extinction of many animals over time. Defranceschi’s advice is "to think of a new line of development that takes into account an equal relationship between man and animal."
Dr Francesca Bisacco, biologist and senior researcher on hippotherapy has introduced the issue of rehabilitation with the horses and the importance to modulate activities by taking into consideration the goals. She launched a provocation, “Does the equestrian rehabilitation work?” Hers was obviously a rhetorical question, because she mentioned some very positive experiences which emphasized the value of the horse as a means of communication and expression for the patient. It is useful, in fact, as it increases the interpersonal and communicative skills; it allows to improve the management of anxiety as the activity with the horse provides security and helps to increase patient’s autonomy and self-esteem.

Dr. Amedeo Bezzetto, psychotherapist at the hospital in Villa Santa Giuliana has shared his experience he has been working on for a couple of years in the health care facility of Verona: “At Santa Giuliana we use horses as a means of relating to children with psychic disabilities, those who are commonly referred to as “fall guys.” We take care of the emotional approach between man and animal and this experiment, called “The Icarus Project” is the first step towards the official recognition of the use of the horse in therapy, which is no longer regarded as on object but as a subject.”

Dr. Fabrizio Varalta, psychotherapist and director of the Health Authority Cerris 20 illustrated his project that has been putting together, for over 20 years, horses and dogs along with patients, analysing results such as anxiety management, overcoming phobias and, from the point of view of the psychomotor area, relaxation, body awareness, balance, changes in muscle tone and motor skills.

“At Cerris we chose to work with horses”, added Dr. Valentina Bianco – veterinary at Cerris – “and we are by their side in this experience at our health care facility. We try to observe the activity from the animal’s point of view, and to understand, through continuous monitoring, what his potential difficulties might be.”

To end the symposium was Dr. Giuseppe Marucci, manager at the Ministry of Education of Rome, who has advanced the possibility of a future introduction of Pet therapy as a discipline examined for educational purposes.