

# Hippophysiotherapy – something for body and soul

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*About 20 years ago Ulrika Stengard-Olsson found out that the horse has the ability to heal and strengthen human bodies that for different reasons do not function properly. As one of Sweden's certified hippophysiotherapists she achieves results that in her opinion were not possible without riding. And she uses Icelandic horses, the best breed for this purpose, she emphasizes.*

– I work only with Island horses, the very best horse, they are very intelligent, Ulrika Stengard-Olsson says. She had horses and been riding all her life. For a long time half-bred horses were interesting but then she discovered the advantages and the special character of the Icelandic horse.

– Now I have switched over completely and feel that this is the right thing, she continues enthusiastically when she tells us about her work with patients and horses at Söderåsens Forsgård. During almost 20 years she has developed her form of treatment, where riding is showing good and long-term results.

– I am also employed by Region Skåne with habilitation of children and young people who has inherent, acquired and remaining lesions, such as CP lesions, spinal cord injuries, autism, or traffic injuries.

– But I also treat grown-up stroke patients, patients with ms, Parkinson, back problems or stress related problems such as burn-out.

Together with her eight Icelandic horses she teaches the patient – by means of a horse - get to know his body, strengthen the muscles, and reduce muscle hardening and knots. The movement of the horse is what helps, stimulates and relaxes. The pelvis is the link between man and horse.

– I usually work with footpace, because that is a three-dimensional walk, similar to the human pelvis movements. A concurrent movement in three directions, forward and backward, from side to side and with rotation, Ulrika explains.



*Kroppskontakten med hästen och att komma ut i naturen är en viktig del av behandlingen. Bilderna ovan och till höger: foto Görgen Persson.*

The footpace movement of the horse is transferred from horse to rider, stimulates and trains e.g. the patient's walking movements.

– This is something that only hippophysiotherapy can achieve; the footpace movement generates about 2,000 changes of position in the body during a treatment of 30 minutes.

The patients often ride bareback to be able to feel the backbone.

– In this way symmetry, coordination and balance are trained. And I work a lot with the seating position. But also for the feeling of a warm fell, a living body that carries you through the nature.

– At the same time I use nature as a treatment. We ride a lot in the forest with the patients, up and down hills, between trees, over meadows. To experience this together with the horses results in many other positive effects. Pleasure, happiness and the social togetherness is just as important.

– Although we work with the body, we must not forget the soul.

In addition to his stable temper the Icelandic horse has another great advantage – the tölt. (Tölt is a four-beat lateral ambling gait mainly found in Icelandic horses.)



– Some patients will never be able to trot, but with the pleasant flow of the tölt, we can increase the speed if necessary.

She knows her horses and her patients and brings them together considering ability and requirement.

Two of the horses were brought up by Ulrika herself, the rest come from Island.

– On Island I have a hippophysiotherapist who looks for suitable horses which I then import and train. And here it is not about a lot of energy and perfect lifts

of legs but about weight-carrying sturdy horses with soft and sure-footed walk.

When she as a certified physiotherapist got interested in riding as a form of treatment, there was no such education in Sweden. She therefore attended a 2-year training course in Denmark. Since then the hippophysiotherapy has got a kind of quality assurance here in Sweden and that owing to IRT, intresseföreningen för ridterapi (association for hippophysiotherapy) where Ulrika is very active.

– Via the Swedish Board of Agriculture we have now pushed through certain requirements which are required for certified hippophysiotherapists. Because of the fact that we work with health care, we have great responsibility, Ulrika points out.

Close cooperation with the patient's doctor is just as self-evident as the record keeping.

– The most important thing is to give the patient quality and security.

During the years Ulrika has seen very good results from her form of treatment and she is an active lecturer and trainer. She can talk about it for a long time, she quickly admits, still deeply engaged in her work. Last autumn she was asked to teach Icelandic physiotherapists who wanted to learn more about hippophysiotherapy.

– On Island there is no such education so I went there, taught 10 inquisitive and interested physiotherapists in English and had a lot of fun.

During her stay on Island she also



Ridsjukgymnast utbildning på Island augusti 2009. Bilden till höger Sigrun Sigurdardottir (t.v) och Ulrika Stengard-Olsen. Foto: Privat

worked together with a riding teacher, Sigrún Sigur döttir, known as a judge and speaker at Landsmöt 2008. This was an exciting encounter.

– I hope that there will be more courses there and simultaneous the physiotherapists on Island strive for their education to be their quality assurance, she adds.

Ulrika is sure that hippophysiotherapy is an important and successful form of treatment.

– As a conventional physiotherapist I never achieved these lasting results.



The aim is to achieve an improvement, something that gives response in the everyday life of the patient – a new ability, stronger muscles, reduced tension and the happiness as well as a positive experience.

– During the first treatment we discuss our aim. If e.g. the patient want to be able to sit on a chair without support, that is an aim. They also tell me what aims they want to reach by riding.

If the patient e.g. wants to be able to lead the horse between two trees, Ulrika can direct the treatment so that both aims can be reached.

– It is so nice to see the longterm results in the patient's everyday life. It is soooo stimulating, says Ulrika

The spark-plug for Ulrika is the positive experiences of the patients.

– It is nice to see the happiness und most often they forget that it is physiotherapy. And of course, it is wonderful to be able to work outside in the nature and together with these fantastic Icelandic horses.



Ridsjukgymnastikbehandling på Söderåsens Forsgård. Foto Görgen Persson.