Background

My name is Natasha Lepore and I am a 4th year student in the Honours Specialization in Medical Sciences program. I started volunteering at SARI Therapeutic Riding six years ago. I got involved with this organization because of my desire to make a difference in the community. SARI is a therapeutic horse riding centre whose mission is to improve the physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth with special needs. My experiences with SARI has complemented my understanding of various diseases and disabilities that I have learned about in university. However, SARI has also shown me the importance of approaching the treatment of certain diseases in a more holistic fashion. Specifically, my experiences at SARI have demonstrated that Hippotherapy is an effective approach to improving the quality of life of children with disabilities.

In Canada, 3.7% of children live with some form of disability that affects their quality of life.¹ For this reason, it is very likely that many people interact with individuals with some form of disability on a regular basis. These disabilities include a vast array of problems pertaining to physical, emotional, and/or mental health, behaviour, and development. Some examples include Down syndrome, autism, communication disorders, and attention deficient disorder. The impact of these disabilities on patients’ quality of life can range from minimal to extreme. Children with severe disabilities often require full time support. Therapy programs are instrumental to improving the quality of life of these individuals and promoting inclusion in the community. Some individuals prefer a holistic approach to treatment and opt to seek treatment in a more natural setting outside of a clinical environment. This form of treatment often promotes compliance in patients and makes their therapy more enjoyable. Among these holistic approaches is hippotherapy, a unique form of alternative therapy which uses horseback riding as its means of treatment. Horseback riding incorporates physical, occupational, and speech therapy into its treatment regime.

As a student in the Honours Specialization of Medical Sciences program at the University of Western University, I have gained knowledge of these disabilities through various science and psychology classes. I have learned about the genetics, physiology, anatomy, biochemistry, and pathology behind some of these disabilities. In addition to learning about the biological aspects of these disorders, psychology classes have taught me additional information about the social, emotional, and mental aspects of these disabilities and how they can negatively impact an individual’s quality of life. While these classes have enhanced my knowledge and understanding of numerous disabilities, I could not achieve a true understanding until I was submerged into an environment where I would have direct exposure to individuals with disabilities. Firsthand experience is essential to gaining a comprehensive understanding of a disability's effect on one's quality of life, and the struggles faced by individuals with disabilities. For the past six years, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to get this firsthand experience by being part of the team of volunteers at SARI Therapeutic Riding, located in Arva, Ontario.
SARI is a therapeutic horse riding centre whose mission is to improve the physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth with special needs. The riding lessons focus on: strengthening and toning muscles; improving balance and coordination, building self-esteem and confidence; boosting social, cognitive, and language skills; and increasing community participation. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance quality of life for the participants. Riders are able to form special bonds and learn relationship skills through interaction with the instructors, volunteers, and horses. All programming for the riders is tailored to meet their individual needs.

My role at SARI is a "sidewalker" which requires me to walk alongside a rider during an entire lesson. I am responsible for the safety and well-being of the participants by providing whatever form of support is needed to ensure that they are safe. I am also responsible for constantly communicating with my students, both verbally and non-verbally. I work directly with the instructor and rider to help achieve the predefined goals that have been developed for that particular rider. One of our main areas of focus during lessons is the physical benefit of riding as many of our students possess physical limitations. Physical benefits for students are achieved through equine movement. As the student is riding the horse, the movement of the student's torso is very similar to the movement of a normal gait. While riding the horse, the movement is dynamic and rhythmic. The rhythmic aspects of the movement allow for strengthening of muscles and the variability of movement increases the number of muscles that benefit from this form of stimulation. The large size of the horse not only provides a stable base for the students to use as a form of support; horse riding also helps to improve core strength, control, and balance. Change in the horse's pace requires students to make alterations to their postural muscles. While the horse is trotting, students will have to use various muscles to stay upright and in control to accommodate the increased speed and bounciness. More advanced riders are taught how to perform a posting trot which promotes further muscle development and coordination as they must learn how to match their movement to the horse's trot. Improved sensory systems and motor planning/control provide additional neurological benefits such as improved coordination, respiratory control, sensory integration skills, and attention skills.

In addition to the physical benefits of hippotherapy, SARI also focuses on emotional, social, and educational benefits of this form of treatment. Some of the emotional benefits that stem from being able to control such a large animal include increased confidence, self-esteem and independence. For children who are confined to a wheelchair, being able to ride a horse provides them with a sense of independence and the ability to move on their own. As the children progress, mastering different riding techniques gives a sense of accomplishment and further improves their self-esteem. During the lessons, the participants improve social skills through interacting with the volunteers and also through verbal and non-verbal communication with the horse. Educational benefits are achieved through following directions, increasing one's attention span, increasing sensory stimulation, and enhancing descriptive skills.

Both the technical knowledge I have learned from lectures and the hands-on experience I have obtained from volunteering at SARI have played a crucial role in shaping my future professional choices. Through volunteering, I have learned the importance of therapy for promoting inclusion within the community. Every individual, no matter what his/her disability, deserves the chance to participate in a community as fully as possible. It is the responsibility of the health care system and its team of professionals to provide the resources necessary to promote this inclusion. I have also learned that it is important to consider alternative therapies such as hippotherapy, music therapy, aquatic therapy and acupuncture as forms of treatment. Together with traditional forms of rehabilitation, they can provide a more holistic approach to treatment. Forms of rehabilitation should be as unique as the individual, as some may respond to and benefit from different forms of treatment. It is important to consider their preferences and needs when determining which course of treatment would be best suited to meet their needs.

SARI has also increased my awareness of the struggles of being underserviced, relying on donations, and the importance of fundraising. SARI is a non-profit and charitable organization that relies on donations to
cover the cost of providing lessons, training instructors, maintaining the facility and horses, and salaries for the staff. Also, over 200 volunteers are needed to ensure that the lessons are safe and enjoyable for the students. I have learned the importance of forming connections with members of the community in order to help solicit the support SARI needs. From one fundraising event in 2012 called SARI Ride-a-Thon, we raised approximately $18,000. I also have a better appreciation for the difficulties of having limited resources, as there is a long waiting list for children wanting to be accepted into the program at SARI. Many factors limit the number of lessons that can be made available, including the number of horses, volunteers, instructors, and the upkeep of the facility. In my future profession, it is likely that I will experience similar challenges with respect to limited resources, funding, and limited services.

SARI is contributing to scientific advancement by demonstrating the benefits of a more holistic approach to therapy. The benefits of hippotherapy are wide-ranging and not as narrowly focused as traditional therapies such as physiotherapy or speech therapy. These traditional therapies are narrow because the treatment provided mainly focuses on just one issue. Many of these treatments may be less successful because they do not provide the sensory, motor, cognitive, and limbic system benefits achieved through hippotherapy. As health care costs continue to increase and funding becomes increasingly more difficult to obtain, a shift from highly specialized forms of treatment to a more encompassing approach may be a cost-effective alternative. In my opinion, participating in forms of therapy that are more holistic can help to reduce the number of different therapy sessions an individual attends. This shift can improve quality of life both for the individual with the disability and their family. SARI is also contributing to advancements in research, as many students participate in the program over the course of several years. This participation provides an excellent opportunity to measure the effectiveness of various therapeutic techniques used at SARI. Treatment regimes can be easily modified if needed in an attempt to achieve the greatest gains in physical, emotional, social, health and well-being.

The knowledge that I have obtained through my academic studies could not have prepared me for the joy that I have felt watching a student come to SARI initially wheelchair-bound, then begin to walk with a walker, to eventually walking without any assistance. SARI provides volunteers with a unique opportunity to play an instrumental role in changing lives stride by stride, and I am grateful to be part of such a rewarding organization.

References

