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# Equi-Assist: The Homecare Nursing Program for Equine Patients

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BY SALLY SILVERMAN

**O**n December 7, 2011, Equi-Assist celebrated its one-year anniversary. While this innovative program has felt the challenges of any newborn entity, the vision and personal experience of Margaret Hamilton Duprey and the passion, skill and commitment behind the equine homecare nursing program remain as clear and as strong as ever.

The program was borne of the realization that the level of nursing care needed by ill or post-surgical horses that have returned home often falls somewhere between the capabilities of the horse owner and what is provided by a veterinarian. Equi-Assist was created to fill that gap, providing compassionate care at home. The program links the primary care veterinarian, owner, trainer, farm manager, New Bolton Center clinicians and farriers together and is the first of its kind in the nation, and possibly the world.

Margaret, a well respected, lifelong equestrian in Chester County, played a pivotal role in the creation of the program. It was through personal experience with her own horses, at home, that she recognized the need for a service offering qualified, experienced professional care to bridge the gap between hospital and home care. Once the idea was born, she was instrumental in guiding the design of the program, and made a generous gift to see it realized.

“Equi-Assist is going to get even better with several new smart technologies being introduced in year two of the program, and plans for a skilled nursing center on New Bolton Center’s campus duplicating a home-like setting for horses that still need special care,” said Margaret. “Those that have used Equi-Assist have been amazed at what a difference it makes in their horses’ recovery and lifestyle.”

James Orsini, DVM, director of Equi-Assist, said, “Despite the universal hurdles of launching any new program, year one of Equi-Assist has many important successes to celebrate. Veterinarians and owners quickly endorsed the business model. We quickly recognized



other opportunities to help owners and primary care veterinarians, including well patient care, massage therapy and nutritional consultation.”

Year two, Dr. Orsini promises, will see the implementation of smart technologies to make monitoring patients easier and more objective.

Patricia Welch is the associate director of Equi-Assist, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the program. “It has been a challenging and exciting year,” said Patty. “We started with one full-time nurse, Jenn Wrigley, and have added two part-time nurses, Ashley Lester and Ashley Watson. All of our nurses are certified veterinary technicians, bringing unequaled training and professional experience to our clients. And we can now provide our clients with 24-hour service, seven days a week — that’s huge.”

While follow-up care to patient hospitalization, including wound management and administration of medications, is a natural mainstay of the program, Welch

says it has been fascinating and fulfilling to see the many unexpected ways in which the program can really make a difference in the lives of those it helps.

“Nutritional consultation has become a significant part of our care,” said Patty.

Before starting with the Equi-Assist program, Jenn trained with a New Bolton Center nutritionist. She continues to broaden her expertise by attending equine nutrition seminars and consults with a nutritionist on every case. She also received training in equine massage.

“The massage service has become a very valuable part of the care that Jenn provides for recovery as well as the healthy horse,” said Patty.

## SUCCESS STORIES

The caseload, said Jenn, is varied and the successes have been gratifying. There was, for example, a pregnant mare. She was apprehensive, did not like to be handled, and was even reluctant to come into the barn. Her owners were concerned that the mare might have problems accepting normal foal behavior. Jenn began a program of regular massage, visiting with her twice a week, mimicking foal habits.

“She was standoffish at first,” Jenn said. “Little by little, though, she became more receptive. By the end of a month, she would allow me to tie her safely. She eventually relaxed to the point of falling asleep.”

The mare delivered a healthy, full-term foal, and was a model mom.

Another foal, from out of state, underwent major surgery for a cleft palate and stayed at a nearby farm after the surgery, receiving care from Equi-Assist nurses. Today she is a normal, full-sized rambunctious youngster who has become the leader of her yearling herd.

A stallion recovering from an infectious disease benefitted from regular diagnostic testing, monitoring and care by Equi-Assist nurses. Today he is the picture of health, gaining weight and thriving.

“We’ve gotten such great feedback,” said Patty. “The people that use the Equi-Assist service absolutely love it. They instill a huge amount of trust in our team.”

Jenn says that she keeps in touch with the clients she has worked with, and they send her updates on the patients’ progress and successes.

“They even send photos,” said Jenn. “It’s heartwarming to know how close we’ve become.”



### JAMES A. ORSINI, DVM, ACVS

*Director of Equi-Assist*

In addition to his international reputation as author, editor, board-certified surgeon, researcher and teacher, Dr. Orsini is associate professor of surgery at Penn Vet and serves as director of the Laminitis Institute. Dr. Orsini founded and directed five International Equine Conferences on Laminitis and Diseases of the Foot, a biennial conference and is co-director of the Laminitis West Conference. In addition to his more than 30 years of surgical experience, Dr. Orsini is co-editor of *Equine Emergencies: Treatment and Procedures* and is preparing the fourth edition of this best-selling book. Dr. Orsini leads the multiple research, clinical and educational components of the Laminitis Institute, crucial to conquering laminitis.



### PATRICIA D. WELCH, BS

*Associate Director, Equi-Assist*

Patty has assisted in the development and leadership of the Laminitis Institute’s core missions of research, education and clinical service since its inception in 2007. Patty has played a key role in the running of the International Equine Conference on Laminitis and Diseases of the Foot and the Laminitis West Conference, and, as associate director of Equi-Assist oversees the day-to-day operation of the business plan.



### JENN A. WRIGLEY, CVT

*Nursing Supervisor, Equi-Assist*

Jenn is the premier equine home care nurse at New Bolton Center. Having earned her associate in science degree from Harcum College in 1996, she is a licensed certified veterinary technician with special interests and nursing skills in caring for horses with laminitis, equine nutrition, neonates and topics relating to caring for the post-hospitalized equine patient. She is a 2010 certificate holder in Equine Sports Massage Therapy by Equissage<sup>®</sup> and has more than 14 years of experience in treating large and small animals, seven of which she spent in the adult and neonatal intensive care units. She is coauthor of a book chapter entitled “Homecare for the Chronic Laminitis Case” in *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Equine Practice*. Jenn is a member of AAETV.