An Exploratory, Qualitative Study of Perceptions of a Hospital-based Animal Assisted Intervention Program

Elizabeth A. Richards, PhD¹
Kathleen Abrahamson, PhD¹
Yun Cai, DNP¹
Marguerite O'Haire, PhD²
Krista Cline, PhD³

(1)School of Nursing, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA
(2)College of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA
(3)Sociology and Criminology, Butler University, Indianapolis, IN, USA
Disclosures

Elizabeth A. Richards, PhD, RN, CHES; Assistant Professor, Purdue University School of Nursing

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding: There was no funding associated with this study.
The purpose of this exploratory study was to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding the experiences and perceptions of hospital staff and volunteers who have participated in a hospital animal assisted intervention program.
Benefits of Human-Animal Interactions

• Physiological
  – Attenuated stress indicators and responses (Friedmann et al., 2009)

• Psychosocial
  – Reduced depression and increased psychological well-being (Barker et al., 2008)

• Social
  – Increased social engagement and interaction (McNicholas et al., 2000)
Animal-Assisted Therapy: A Meta-Analysis

Janelle Nimer and Brad Lundahl
College of Social Work, University of Utah, USA

ABSTRACT Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has been practiced for many years and there is now increasing interest in demonstrating its efficacy through research. To date, no known quantitative review of AAT studies has been published; our study sought to fill this gap. We conducted a comprehensive search of articles reporting on AAT in which we reviewed 250 studies, 49 of which met our inclusion criteria and were submitted to meta-analytic procedures. Overall, AAT was associated with moderate effect sizes in improving outcomes in four areas: Autism-spectrum symptoms, medical difficulties, behavioral problems, and emotional well-being. Contrary to expectations, characteristics of participants and studies did not produce differential outcomes. AAT shows promise as an additive to established interventions and future research should investigate the conditions under which AAT can be most helpful.
Overview of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

• Community settings
  – Increased social interaction (Wood et al., 2005)

• Outpatient settings
  – Improvements in depression (Souter et al., 2007) and autism spectrum disorder (O’Haire, 2017)

• Inpatient settings
  – Emerging research in pediatric oncology settings (Chur-Hansen et al., 2014)
Patient Outcomes of AAT

Sample outcomes from a growing body of evidence:

- Reduced fear and anxiety before procedures (Barker et al., 2003)
- Reduced loneliness and depression in long-term care facilities (Banks et al., 2002)
- Reduced feelings of pain among children (Braun et al., 2009)
Nursing Staff Outcomes of AAT

Very limited studied outcomes

• Improved morale, more optimistic (Barba, 1995)

• More cheerful, motivated and positive (Gagnon, 2004)

• Promotes relaxation, calmness, facilitated bonding with patients (Rosetti et al., 2008)
Study Context

- 180-bed medical and surgical community hospital in a medium sized Midwestern metropolitan area
- AAT program was administered by the hospital’s volunteer services
- All of the animals participating in the program were dogs, and each dog and handler were accredited from Therapy Dogs International
- Animals provided services in reception areas, surgical waiting rooms, the emergency department, and medical/ surgical units (including pediatrics)
- Animal rounds occurred mostly during daytime hours, and at least weekly but not daily.
Study Methods

• 9 face-to-face semi-structured interviews
  – ranged in time from 10 to 25 minutes
• Transcripts were thematically analyzed using NVivo 11 software
• Analyses were guided by an inductive content analysis approach.
Outcome Themes

1) Descriptions of the therapy dogs
2) Contacts with the dogs at work
3) Connection with the dogs outside of work
4) Benefits
   1) decreasing staff stress
   2) promoting social interactions and interaction with patients
   3) providing comfort and company to patients.
5) Drawbacks
Descriptions of the therapy dogs

- Adorable
- White and fluffy
- Giant teddy bear
- Gentle eyes
Contacts with the dogs at work

• “I...go see them unless I am really busy.”
• “We always pet them.”
• “…we will seek them out if we see them”
• “I’d always try to stay a little bit late so I could see [the dog].”
• “I try to get as much contact as I possibly can.”
• “‘I’ve got to see a patient; will you guys just wait for a few minutes? I just need so bad to give so and so a hug.’ Whichever dog is here, even our hospitalist will come out into the hallways and just spend that time with the patients and talk about their dogs.”
Connection with the dogs outside of work

• “I talk about [the dogs] with my kids”
• “I will tell stories to people... ‘Hey, I was at work and Teddy came to visit or this big Great Dane came to visit’. I will tell people how good the program is and I will wonder what those dogs are up to today and if they are getting into trouble or working hard.”
• “[Teddy] is on my Facebook.”
Benefits of the program

• Decreasing staff stress
• Providing comfort and company to patients
• Promoting social interaction
Drawbacks of the program

• The dogs’ presence may sadden patients who missed their own dogs, but gave no specific examples of this occurring.
• No respondents mentioned allergies or distraction during caregiving as concerns
• One nurse respondent felt it important that the dogs be limited to certain areas of the hospital due to infection control concerns
• Two nurses raised the concern that their patients did not benefit as much as they could from the animals because of the short duration of their hospital stay.
Conclusions

• Benefits of program outweighed drawbacks
• The benefits of the program for hospital staff included reductions in stress, promotion of social interactions, and a perception of comfort and company provided to patients.
• The capacity of animals to assist hospital staff in these ways represents a novel application of animal-assisted intervention that extends beyond its originally intended purpose to assist patients alone.
• The flow on effects for staff and other personnel who encounter animals has been understudied, and these findings indicate that further attention and acknowledgement is warranted to comprehend the full range of outcomes from these programs, particularly in acute hospital settings.
References


• Barker, S. B., Pandurangi, A. K., & Best, A. M. (2003). Effects of animal-assisted therapy on patients' anxiety, fear, and depression before ECT. *The journal of ECT, 19*(1), 38-44.


Thank you!
Questions?