

Canine-assisted Adjunct Therapy in the Military: An Intriguing Alternative Modality

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ABSTRACT

The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs are exploring the use of canine-assisted therapy as an adjunct intervention for assisting wounded warriors in adapting to the signature war injuries of posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. The civilian health care system is increasingly following their lead. Quantitative research shows positive physiological and psychological benefits. Qualitative studies report positive quality of life benefits. Nurse practitioners should be aware of possible patient participation in canine-assisted therapy. The challenge is showing empirical evidence for its cost-effectiveness in providing comprehensive, holistic health care.

Keywords: canine-assisted therapy, posttraumatic stress disorder, service dogs, traumatic brain injury, wounded warriors

Published by Elsevier, Inc.

In this article, we describe recent developments in integrating specialty trained dogs in military and veterans' health care settings as clinicians and researchers explore how these interventions enhance the lives of those working with these special animals. We begin by focusing on the increasing efforts within the federal sector to use canine-assisted therapy (CAT) as a program of adjunct therapy in working with wounded warriors who are experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or traumatic brain injury (TBI)—the signature wounds of our nation's most recent armed conflicts. We fully expect nurse practitioners (NPs), regardless of clinical setting, to be increasingly seeing patients who have been exposed to CAT, and, thus, they should be aware of the practical implications of their patients' prior experiences and expectations.

We then provide an overview of research findings regarding the physiological and psychological benefits of CAT. With the increasing recognition and diagnosis of PTSD and TBI in wounded warriors and the ongoing effort to reintegrate these veterans into their local communities, there is little question NPs, of all

specialties, will be increasingly working with patients who have been exposed to CAT during their recovery process. Therapy dogs, for example, are currently being used at the National Institutes of Health clinical center with patients undergoing therapy. This article is intended as an introduction to this clinical evolution, and we urge clinicians to expressly inquire whether their patients are veterans and, if so, if they have experience with CAT. If affirmative, we suggest being in contact with nursing leaders within the local Department of Defense or Veterans Affairs (VA) treatment facilities for follow-up guidance.

MILITARY SERVICE DOGS

From their earliest childhood days, most Americans grew up familiar with Seeing Eye dogs and are impressed by how these caring and highly trained companions are able to benefit those who were born or have become severely visually impaired (eg, blind). Because of their keen senses, dogs are used by service professions outside of health care, including fire and police departments, to guard and detect drugs as well

as provide assistance in emergencies. Military working dogs are trained to perform a wide range of tasks (eg, identifying improvised explosive devices during Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF] and Enduring Freedom [OEF] in Afghanistan, which is the longest armed conflict in our nation's history). Although dogs have served in operational military roles for generations (eg, as guard dogs), there is a relatively new integration of dogs into the military health care network, particularly as a component of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).¹

For the authors, 1 of the most memorable aspects of serving within the military health care system has been the increasing presence of therapeutic service dogs. Since the beginning of OEF and OIF, these courageous animals have been working with military members who sustained physical and psychological combat injuries. They have proven invaluable for promoting the independent functioning of service members recovering from grave injuries as well as lifting their spirits during the long road of recovery. One unique program entitled Combat Stress Control deploys specially trained dogs in theater for active military personnel to provide emotional support for dealing with combat stress, home front issues, loneliness, and other psychosocial concerns. Other highly trained canines can be found in treatment facilities/programs administered by the Department of Defense and VA. Given its intuitive applicability, both agencies have explored efforts to use and evaluate the effectiveness of therapy dogs as an adjunctive CAM therapy in facilitating the recovery of wounded warriors from the traumas of PTSD and TBI.

The VA stopped using this approach in 2012 because of the perceived lack of rigorous scientific evidence supporting its mental health efficacy in addition to reported safety concerns regarding the adequacy of the training of the dogs. That same year, *The United States Army Medical Department Journal* published a special edition focusing on CAT in military medicine. The journal editor expressed a considerably different perspective than the leadership of the VA, heralding "the evolving understanding and acceptance of this nontraditional augmentation to existing therapies for both physical and psychological injuries."^{2(p2)}

THE VISION OF THE FIRST NURSE SERVING AS ACTING ARMY SURGEON GENERAL

The beginning of animal-assisted therapy in the United States Army has been credited to the vision of then Acting Surgeon General M.G. Gale Pollock, the first nurse to hold this position, who in 2007 approved the assignment of 2 dogs to Iraq at the request of the 85th Medical Detachment.³

The importance of service dogs for a variety of health issues has grown significantly in the last decade or so. Evolving from the traditional "guide dog" for the visually impaired, we now see the incredible results from the ability of dogs to smell various chemical changes in our bodies. Dogs now assist us when we have diabetes, seizures, hearing limitations, and posttraumatic stress. The challenges we must address are educating the public to the importance of these work dogs. They are not "pets"; they are "work dogs." The difference between service animals and alleged emotional support animals is one of training. A service dog is trained, obedient, quiet, and focused on their owner. Collectively, we need to gather the various service animal organizations together in order to propose a standard minimum training criteria for service animals (M.G.G. Pollock, personal communication, March 2015).

Researchers have addressed the benefit of systematically involving animals or pets with military personnel and their families from several different perspectives. Muller and Callina⁴ explored their impact on the resilience and strength of youth in military-connected families, especially in the context of deployment. Companion animals were found to be a resource for developing resilience, thriving, and developing adaptive positive coping strategies. Moore⁵ conducted in-depth interviews with combat veterans finding overarching themes, such as the amelioration of stress symptoms, and concluding that CAT was generally therapeutic in relieving psychological difficulties and dealing with fundamental human needs. Davis⁶ and Winkle et al⁷ report similar positive findings within the civilian sector. McGraw⁸ reviewed the positive impact found on the dog handlers themselves.

SIGNATURE INJURIES OF WOUNDED WARRIORS

There has been an unprecedented survival rate of military medicine because in part of advances in

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