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Stress level evaluation in a dog during animal-assisted therapy in pediatric surgery

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1 Stress level evaluation in a dog during animal-assisted therapy in pediatric surgery

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14 Abstract

15 Animal-assisted interventions (AAls) are associated with positive effects on human psychological and
16 physiological health. Although quality standards in AAls appear to be high, only few investigations have
17 focused on potential welfare implications in therapy dogs. In the present study, we monitored behavioral
18 measures and heart rate in a therapy dog that participated in Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) during post-
19 operative awakening in a pediatric surgery ward. Work-related activity, behavior, response to human
20 action, and heart rate were analyzed over 20 working sessions in an experienced therapy dog. No
21 physiological or behavioral indicators of stress, fatigue, or exhaustion were present during AAT, suggesting
22 that, with the limited generalizability of a case study, this activity did not negatively impact on the welfare
23 of the dog. Further investigation into the effects of animal-assisted therapy on dogs' physiological markers
24 and behavior is warranted.

25 **Keywords:** animal-assisted therapy, animal welfare, behavior, heart rate, dog, stress

26 Introduction

27 Animal-assisted interventions (AAls) are achieving a certain level of recognition worldwide and this is
28 accompanied by a growing body of research on the effect of these programs on human health and well-
29 being (Bernabei et al., 2013; Marcus, 2013; Calcaterra et al., 2015). AAls, which use animals for human
30 benefit, can be considered animal assisted therapy (AAT) when they involve the implementation of goal-
31 directed, documented, and evaluated methodology in professional settings. In contrast, animal-assisted

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