



Medical practitioners' attitudes towards animal assisted interventions. An Italian survey[☆]



Anna Pinto^{a,*}, Marta De Santis^b, Carlo Moretti^c, Luca Farina^b, Licia Ravarotto^a

^a Health Awareness and Communication Department, Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie, Italy

^b Italian National Reference Centre for Animal Assisted Interventions, Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie, Italy

^c Dipartimento della Salute della Donna e del Bambino, Azienda Ospedaliera – Università di Padova, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The present study had a dual purpose: to obtain a comprehensive picture of the Italian medical practitioners' opinions, professional experiences, training needs and knowledge of Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI); and to provide a detailed description of the medical practitioners who are characterized by a strongly positive attitude towards AAI.

Methods: An online survey addressed to Italian medical practitioners was carried out using a 35-items structured questionnaire. Data obtained from the survey were analysed through appropriate summary statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and logistic regression analysis.

Results: 670 medical practitioners participated in the online survey. Among them, 508 stated that they knew of AAI. 93.7% of these described themselves fully favourable towards the use of the human-animal relationship for therapeutic purposes, 84.4% defined themselves as confident and interested in studying the theme. A positive attitude towards AAI was greater in females, in people between 45 and 54 years old, in those who are pet owners and in those who believe that conferences are the most suitable tool to share information on AAI.

Conclusions: The chance of having a positive attitude towards AAI is higher in respondents with specific characteristics. Data collected could be used as a starting point to promote and implement communication and training activities on AAI addressed to medical practitioners.

1. Introduction

Animal assisted interventions (AAI) are defined by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) as goal-oriented interventions that intentionally include or incorporate animals in health, education and human service (e.g., social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans.¹ According to the objectives of the interventions, they can be distinguished into animal assisted therapy (AAT), animal assisted education (AAE) and animal assisted activities (AAA).

AAI have become increasingly popular during the last decades in parallel with the recognition of the benefits of human/animal interactions and the large number of companion animals, both in Europe and in Italy.^{2,3} During recent years, several studies have evaluated the efficacy of AAI: a systematic review of randomized controlled trials on the effectiveness of AAT by Kamioka et al. concluded that AAT may be an effective treatment for mental and behavioural disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, and alcohol/drug addiction, though further

investigation is still necessary.^{4,5}

Animals are also being progressively introduced into human health care facilities: a study by Sobo et al. in 2006⁶ demonstrated that canine visitation therapy (CVT) can support traditional therapies aimed at pain management in children. The use of quali-quantitative methods in a sample of 25 children-adolescents who have undergone surgery and experienced acute post-operative pain, and in their parents, has shown that CVT can offer a significant reduction in pain, both physically and emotionally. In Italy, there are some consolidated experiences involving animals in the process of care within a hospital setting: for example, the Meyer Hospital in Florence, the Niguarda Ca' Granda Hospital in Milan, and the Pediatric Department of the Hospital of Padua.^{7,8} Nevertheless, the use of AAI in contexts such as these should be evaluated on two levels: on one side the benefits for patients, while on the other the perspective of healthcare personnel that have to manage a complex situation that requires specific competences and cautions (for example securing human and animal welfare).

The diffusion and the development of AAI, particularly for those

[☆] Authors declare that the views expressed in this manuscript are their own and not an official position of the institution(s) or funder.

* Corresponding author at: Health Awareness and Communication Department, Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie, Viale dell'Università 10, 35020 Legnaro (PD), Italy.
E-mail address: APinto@izsvenezie.it (A. Pinto).

Table 1
Structure of the questionnaire.

Section	Questions	Response options
Socio-demographic information	Gender	Male; Female
	Age	Open question
Opinion towards AAI	Geographical area	Northwest; Northeast; Centre; South and Islands [Sardinia and Sicily]
	Years of experience in the medical profession	< 10; 10–20; 21–30; > 30
	Position held	Hospital medical specialist; General practitioner (GP); Outpatient medical specialist; Specializing doctor; Freelance professional doctor; Paediatrician; Retired doctor; Doctor licensed in the medical profession, but waiting to become a specialist; Odontologist; Other
	Owning pets	Yes; No
	Do you know AAI?	Yes; No
	Have you ever sought information on AAI?	Yes; No
	Which information sources do you mainly use to seek information on AAI?	Radio/tv/newspaper; Specialized medical journals; Institutional web sites; Non institutional web sites (not belonging to the National Health Service bodies); Social media (blog, forum, etc.); Books on the topic; Meeting/professional conferences; Training activities; In-service training programs; Colleagues; Cultural or Voluntary associations; Other
	Which is your opinion towards AAI?	I'm fully favourable towards AAI; I have some doubts/aversions; I'm not favourable
	In your opinion, could AAI be risky interventions for the patient?	No, I think they aren't; Yes a little, it depends on the animal involved in the intervention; Yes a little, it depends on the disorder that affects the patient; In part yes, it depends on the age of the patient; In part yes, it depends on the skills of the operators involved; Absolutely yes; I'm not enough informed on this issue to express an opinion
	In general, referring to AAI, how do you describe yourself?	Convinced and interested in the topic; Convinced, but not interested in the topic; Sceptic, but interested in the topic; Sceptic and without interest in the topic
Knowledge and professional experience	In your opinion, how each of the following aspects related to AAI is a benefit?	Likert Scale 1-10
	Do you know the difference between AAA and AAT?	Yes; No
	Do you know what the AAE interventions are?	Yes; No
	Have your patients ever asked you information on AAI efficacy?	Yes; No
	Have you ever suggested AAI to your patients?	Yes; No
Training and communication needs	How do you assess the effects observed in patients exposed to AAI?	Very positive; Quite positive; I have found no effects; Negative effects; I have had no news of the outcome of the interventions from my patients; I've never had patients exposed to this type of interventions
	Have you ever attended informative/formative meetings on AAI?	Yes; No
	Would you like to attend training or refresher courses on AAI?	Yes; No
	In your opinion, which tool is most suitable to disseminate information on this topic?	Conferences; Training in the classroom; distance learning; Blended training (classroom + online); Newsletter; Other
	In your opinion, which source is most influential in the dissemination of information on the topic?	Specialist centres; Associations; Ministry of Health; Local health organizations; Institutional websites; Radio/tv/newspapers; Social media; Other

interventions which aim to support traditional therapies, highlights the need for institutional involvement and for guidelines and regulations. The Italian situation is noteworthy because the Ministry of Health instituted in 2009 a National Reference Centre for Animal Assisted Interventions (NRC AAI) located at the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie (IZSve).⁹ Moreover, in March 2015, Italy sanctioned an agreement between the government and regional authorities on the document 'National guidelines for AAI'. According to this agreement, an AAT requires a medical prescription.^{10,11}

As a counterweight of this increasing diffusion, a few studies have investigated physicians' attitude towards AAI. It is important to study the conditions that determine the prescription of one treatment over another. Therefore, a thorough study of the attitude of the practitioners who prescribe these treatments is necessary.

A summary by Trembath¹² discusses this topic, mentioning a survey conducted in 2014 by the HABRI Foundation of 1000 family physicians and general practitioners: 97% of the respondents believe there are health benefits resulting from pet ownership. Other studies were focused on specific contexts, such as farm animals and health staff¹³ psychiatric disorders,^{14,15} paediatric wards,¹⁶ occupational therapy,¹⁷ and nursing homes.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, analysis of the literature has highlighted the lack of data and research involving medical practitioners' attitude towards AAI, both in the Italian and in the international contexts.

Therefore, an investigation was carried out to provide a comprehensive description of the opinions, knowledge, experience and perceptions that Italian medical practitioners (physicians and surgeons members of the Italian National Federation of Associations of Physicians, Surgeons and Dentists – FNOMCeO) have regarding this issue.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Aim

In order to fill the lack of data on this specific topic, the present study had the following dual purpose:

- To obtain a comprehensive picture of the Italian medical practitioners opinions, professional experiences, training needs and knowledge of AAI;
- To provide a detailed description of a specific category of medical practitioners: those who are characterized by a strongly positive attitude towards AAI.

The choice to analyse in depth this specific target group was due to the need to identify medical practitioners who are more interested in the topic, who need and require appropriate training, and who can promote and prescribe AAI to their patients.

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