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## Original Study

## Animal-Assisted Interventions in Dutch Nursing Homes: A Survey

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## A B S T R A C T

## Keywords:

Animal-assisted interventions  
nursing homes  
animal welfare  
hygiene  
safety  
survey

**Objectives:** Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) have become more and more popular in nursing homes in the past decade. Various initiatives for using animals in nursing homes have been developed over the years (eg, animal visiting programs, residential companion animals, petting zoos) and, on the whole, the number of nursing homes that refuse animals on their premises has declined. In this survey, we aimed to determine how many Dutch nursing homes offer AAIs, what type of interventions are used, and with what aim. We also focus on the use of underlying health, hygiene, and (animal) safety protocols.

**Methods:** Using an online Dutch nursing home database, we invited all listed (457) nursing home organizations in the Netherlands (encompassing a total of 804 nursing home locations) to participate in our digital survey, powered by SurveyMonkey. The survey consisted of a total of 45 questions, divided into general questions about the use of animals in interventions; the targeted client population(s); and specific questions about goals, guidelines, and protocols. The results were analyzed with SPSS Statistics.

**Results:** In the end, 244 surveys, representing 165 organizations, were returned: 125 nursing homes used AAI in one way or another, 40 did not. Nursing homes that did not offer AAI cited allergy and hygiene concerns as the most important reasons. Most nursing homes offering AAI used visiting animals, mostly dogs (108) or rabbits (76). A smaller number of nursing homes had resident animals, either living on the ward or in a meadow outside.

Almost all programs involved animal-assisted activities with a recreational purpose; none of the participating nursing homes provided animal assisted therapy with therapeutic goals. Psychogeriatric patients were most frequently invited to participate. A total of 88 nursing homes used alternatives when animals were not an option or not available. The most popular alternative was the use of stuffed animals (83) followed by FurReal Friends robotic toys (14). The sophisticated robot seal Paro was used in 7 nursing homes.

A large percentage (80%) of nursing homes that worked with animals did not have AAI-specific health protocols or animal welfare and safety protocols underlying the animal activities or specific selection criteria for the selection of suitable animals.

**Conclusion:** Most of the participating Dutch nursing homes offer AAI in recreational programs (animal-assisted activities) for psychogeriatric clients (using visiting animals, especially dogs). Most nursing homes do not have specific AAI protocols for animal welfare, hygiene, and safety during animal activities, nor do they employ specific selection criteria for participating animals and their handlers.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

De Zorgboog, a nursing home and health care institution in the Netherlands, provided the funds to carry out this survey.

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In the past 50 years, animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) have risen from sporadic to mainstream in diverse settings, including hospitals, psychiatric care, schools and prisons.<sup>1</sup> The spectrum of AAIs practiced in these settings includes animal-assisted activities (AAAs, with recreational goals), animal-assisted therapy (AAT, with therapeutic goals), and animal-assisted education (AAE, with educational goals). Nursing homes are equally well suited for AAI programs, both from a client and an organizational perspective. Improving quality of life, for example, is

one of the recurring challenges in elderly care management, especially when combined with complex debilitating illnesses and a restricted financial budget.<sup>2</sup> The past 2 decades, therefore, have seen an exponential increase in the incorporation of complementary interventions in nursing homes, especially in dementia care, including AAIs.<sup>3,4</sup> Dog visitation programs, in particular, are very popular and various organizations exist worldwide today to assist nursing homes in starting and maintaining such programs.<sup>5</sup> Usually these programs are set up for recreational purposes, essentially meaning they provide pleasant human-animal contact opportunities with sometimes additional benefits, like stimulating social contact with other clients or volunteers. Many articles have been written about the benefits of the human-animal bond, both in sickness and in health.<sup>6</sup> Friedmann et al,<sup>7,8</sup> for example, showed that petting dogs can positively influence blood pressure and the presence of a friendly dog reduces cardiovascular responses to a stressor like public speaking.

Researchers are more and more focused on surpassing the anecdotal evidence of AAI effects via controlled trials in diverse settings, including nursing homes, and several reviews on this subject have been published in the past decade.<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with the rising popularity of AAI, however, concerns about professionalism, hygiene, zoonoses, safety, and animal welfare have been raised. Definitions and guidelines for AAI have, albeit slowly, been developed in the past decade, culminating in the 2014 International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) white paper on this subject.<sup>10</sup>

Following the international trend, AAI has become equally popular in the Netherlands. Various initiatives for using animals in Dutch nursing homes have developed over the years (eg, animal visiting programs, residential companion animals, petting zoos). Several organizations that provide pet-visitation programs for nursing homes exist, as well as training programs for volunteers, who want to participate in AAI programs with their animal.<sup>11</sup> The Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden offers an “animals in health care” bachelor as part of an animal-management study program.<sup>12</sup> In 2013, the first European professorate in anthrozoology was instated at the Open University in Heerlen, focusing on various research questions in the AAI field and collaborating in the recently established Institute for Anthrozoology, IVA.<sup>13,14</sup> Both theory and practice are thus well represented in the Netherlands, but it is unclear whether they actually meet each other where it matters most, that is, at the human-animal interactional level, and consequently lead to best practices based on the available scientific theory.

In this article, we describe an AAI-oriented survey conducted among Dutch nursing homes, with the purpose to determine how many Dutch nursing homes use animals in one way or another and to categorize the various practices of AAI in those nursing homes (ie, AAA or AAT, targeted client population, involved staff). Additionally we aimed to analyze what criteria are important for Dutch nursing home staff in deciding for or against the use of animals and if Dutch nursing home staff adheres to specific guidelines during AAI sessions.

## Methods

Using the online Dutch nursing home database KiesBeter,<sup>15</sup> a nursing home comparison and review Web site, we invited all listed (457) nursing home organizations in the Netherlands (encompassing a total of 804 nursing home locations) to participate in a digital survey. We used the main contact e-mail address as provided in the database to send an invitation, with accompanying information detailing the goals of the survey and a digital link to the online questionnaire, powered by SurveyMonkey, a digital surveying tool.<sup>16</sup> We asked the main addressee to forward the survey to all nursing home locations belonging to the organization, potentially creating a total of 804 respondents.

The online survey consisted of 45 questions, mostly single or multiple-choice, and focused on the use of animals in general (ie, animal specifics, type of interventions, selection criteria, alternatives, reasons not to use animals), the targeted client population(s) (eg, dementia, somatic illness, psychiatric illness, hospice care), participant selection criteria, and the intended intervention goals. We were also interested in the use of specific (AAI) guidelines and protocols while managing AAI programs and the value respondents adhere to different aspects of those guidelines.

All results were anonymized and analyzed with descriptive statistical tests using SPSS Statistics (IBM SPSS Statistics, IBM Corporation, Chicago, IL).

## Results

A total of 244 surveys were returned, a response rate of 30%. When corrected for incomplete entries (ie, surveys with more than 50% left blank), the resulting 219 respondents represented 165 nursing homes, 21% of all nursing home locations in the Netherlands. Respondents were mostly working as part of the recreational staff, with nursing and management staff in second and third place (Figure 1).

A number of nursing homes (28) asked multiple employees to participate, creating 54 duplicate entries for those nursing homes in total. In case of discordant responses in those duplicate entries, we used the entry of the respondent most likely to know the actual situation (eg, preferring entries by recreational staff of nursing home wards over, for example, managers). When corrected for those duplicate entries, the results show that 125 nursing homes (76%) did use AAI in one way or another and 40 did not. According to the respondents, dogs were used most frequently, followed by rabbits and birds (Figure 2). Less mentioned animals (fewer than 10 mentions) are clustered in the “other” category and include rats, pigs, horses, donkeys, cows, and even a llama and an iguana.

According to the respondents, AAI sessions typically involved 1 to 4 animals (85 mentions). When asked about the animal’s origin or ownership, 13 nursing homes mentioned using only resident animals (either in the house or on a meadow outside), 50 used only visiting animals, and 37 nursing homes used both. The remaining 25 nursing homes did not specify the origin or ownership of the animals.

The 40 nursing homes that did not use animals cited several reasons that could be divided into 6 distinct categories:

- hygiene concerns (15 mentions)
- allergy concerns (10 mentions)
- animal welfare cannot be guaranteed (11 mentions)
- fear of legal liability (2 mentions)
- perceived fear of animals among clients (3 mentions)
- no qualified personnel available (6 mentions)

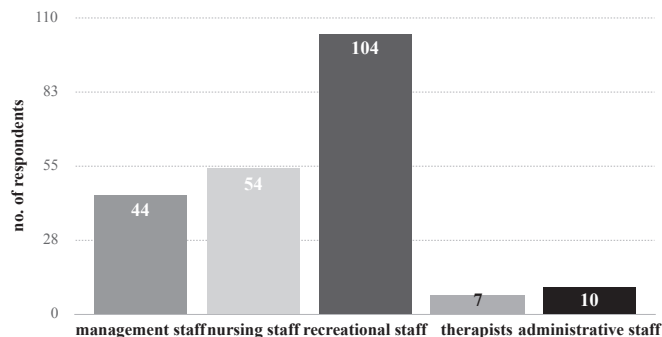


Fig. 1. Number of respondents per function profile (n = 219 respondents).

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