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Psychiatric service dogs as a tertiary prevention modality for veterans living with post-traumatic stress disorder

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To document the usability of psychiatric service dogs (PsySDs) as a tertiary prevention modality from the perspective of veterans who have been using a PsySD 2 to 4 years as an assistive aid for post-traumatic stress disorder symptom (PTSD) management.

Method: A case series study with PsySD primary users was carried out with 10 Canadian veterans recruited from 4 different dog training schools. Researchers conducted semi-structured telephone interviews and asked questions pertaining to four domains addressing the PsySD's 'usability'. A content and thematic analysis were realized using an inductive and deductive approach.

Results: Our conceptual framework proposes four main themes with their associated subthemes: 1-Service dog's roles and tasks (8 subthemes, e.g. acting as a socializing agent, maintaining an appropriate free space around the veteran), 2-Personal advantages and Environmental impacts (8 subthemes, e.g. alleviating symptoms; increasing outings and physical activities, enabling social interactions and relationship building), 3-Obstacles (4 subthemes, e.g. high costs of dog maintenance, dog's presence attracted unwanted public attention, prompting intrusive questions), and 4-Recommendations for PsySD programs (16 subthemes, e.g. creating a national registry for PsySD, encouraging mental health practitioners' involvement).

Conclusions and Implications for Practice: Themes 1 and 2 are positive perceptions, and theme 4 suggests relevant potential improvements. The current study offers insights into how PsySDs concretely assist primary users and can help addressing PTSD chronicity. It presents the roles professionals may play when dealing with patients using PsySDs for PTSD. The proposed conceptual framework can be useful to policy makers, dog trainers and caregivers.

1. Introduction

Based on the documented benefits of animal-assisted therapy, psychiatric service dogs (PsySD) have become increasingly used as an assistive aid (Cortani, 2013; Krause-Parello, Sarni, & Padden, 2016; O'Haire, Guerin, & Kirkham, 2015). A growing number of veterans living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are now looking into it as a promising new approach to facilitate recovery and alleviate symptoms (Krause-Parello et al., 2016). Scientific literature on the

actual psychological benefits of PsySD on veterans with PTSD or on the PsySD's usability is very limited, mostly anecdotal or based on a single person's testimony (Krause-Parello et al., 2016; Segal, 2016). Usability refers to the "extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use" (International organization for standardization, 2002). Therefore, in the case of the current research paper, usability refers to the extent to which the PsySD can be used by veterans living with PTSD to manage symptoms more efficiently in order to

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resume meaningful daily life activities.

The lack of empirical knowledge on the usability of PsySD, more specifically for veterans dealing with PTSD, may contribute to mental health professionals' dilemma on whether to recommend its use or to incorporate it into therapy. Policy makers' hesitation to recognize the PsySD as an adequate assistive aid may be explained by findings of a recent Canadian consultation among 21 stakeholders that revealed that there are flaws, glitches and pitfalls concerning basic dog training and breed standards, dog and veteran selection, pairing-up criteria, training and follow-up procedures (Vincent et al., 2017). Please note that "assistive aid" is considered here as a non-pharmaceutical intervention.

Moreover, there is little in the literature that would suggest norms related to training requirements for PsySD used for PTSD. No training standards or certification processes are currently in place in Canada. There are international norms and standards related to service dogs trained for persons with physical disabilities (motor, visual and hearing impairments). Assistance Dogs International ADI (2015) estimates that it takes approximately 120 h of training over 6 months for service dogs that will be used to assist persons with physical disabilities. According to ADI, it requires 1–2 h of training per day over a period of 6 months, or 180–360 h to produce a well-trained service dog. Costs for acquiring and training the PsySD can add up quickly: on-site training often implies flying to another city and paying for accommodation during the stay. The PsySD may have to undergo an updated training sessions that are charged to the veteran in order to better fit his evolving needs. These costs are combined with the expenses associated with providing the PsySD top quality food and mandatory veterinarian check-ups to ensure his health. The cost paid by seven dog training schools, in our actual pilot project, varies from 1800\$ to 26,500\$ CAN\$ to train a working service dog and the veteran must pay between 0\$ and 6000\$ CAN\$ (Béland, Vincent, & Dumont, 2017). As of now, Veteran Affairs Canada only dedicates funds to cover for some of these expenses to veterans enrolled in pilot studies, such as the current one. An amount of 1500 CAN\$ was allocated to each veteran to ease up the financial burden associated with acquiring and training a PsySD.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is often associated with depression onset (Stander, Thomsen, & Highfill-McRoy, 2014) or lifetime depression (Boscarino, Hoffman, Pitcavage, & Urosevich, 2015; Dekel, Solomon, Horesh, & Ein-Dor, 2014), poorer overall health due to the influence of depression (Asmundson, Stein, & McCreary, 2002), suicidal ideation (Debeer, Kimbrel, Meyer, Gulliver, & Morissette, 2014), cognitive deficits (Burris, Ayers, Ginsberg, & Powell, 2008; Edwards, 2015), lower quality of life (Raab, Mackintosh, Gros, & Morland, 2015), sleep perturbations, recurrent nightmares, avoidance, emotional numbing, hypervigilance and anxious hyperarousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Psychosocial consequences include social reclusion, strain on significant relationships and poor family or social functioning (Evans, McHugh, Hopwood, & Watt, 2003; McMillan, Sareen, & Asmundson, 2014), an increased burden and psychological distress among caregivers (Caska & Renshaw, 2011) and self and social stigmatization (Mittal et al., 2013). Pharmacotherapy (Jain, Greenbaum, & Rosen, 2012; Puetz, Youngstedt, & Herring, 2015) and diverse forms of trauma-focused psychotherapy (Kitchiner, Roberts, Wilcox, & Bisson, 2012) are currently the most commonly employed forms of treatments.

There is, however, an increasing body of literature supporting the partial efficacy of these treatments (Frueh, Mirabella, Chobot, & Fossey, 1994). Smaller effect sizes have been observed for psychotherapeutic treatments when used with veterans with PTSD as compared to when used with civilians presenting a similar diagnosis (Peterson, Foa, & Riggs, 2011). In their review, Schottenbauer, Glass, Arnkoff, Tendick, and Gray (2008) found that "[...] therapies have relative large non-response or dropout rates [that] exceeded 50% on at least some measures". The use of the PsySD, as an assistive aid in conjunction with psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy, may thus increase potential for relative recovery or at least partly counteract the progression of the

condition's chronicity. The extent of the chronicity is increasingly being documented as more longitudinal studies are undertaken; available findings, however, suggest that veterans can have a lifetime PTSD diagnosis (Schnurr, Lunney, Sengupta, & Waelde, 2003). This evidence tends to position investigating the PsySD as a tertiary prevention modality as a highly relevant matter.

The objective of the current study is thus to document the usability of psychiatric service dogs as a tertiary prevention modality from the perspective of veterans who have been using a PsySD 2 to 4 years as an assistive aid for PTSD management.

2. Method

2.1. Study design

A case series study with primary users was selected (Andrade, 2009; Anthony & Jack, 2009; Keyzer, 2000; Yin, 2014); the "case" here consists of veterans with a PsySD as analyzed from the perspective of the PsySD's usability. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Université Laval (2015-118).

2.2. Participants and sampling

To be eligible, participants had to: be a veteran, have received a diagnosis of PTSD, have been using the PsySD as an assistive aid for at least two years and for no more than four years and have completed the training in a PsySD training school in Canada. A convenient and strategic sample of ten participants was proposed to fulfill considerations for case studies (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Yin, 2014). Participants were recruited through dog training schools' managers in Canada; their aid was solicited through a standardized e-mail asking them to each recruit two veterans. Managers from four different dog training schools redirected via email a total of 8 veterans interested in the research project to the research coordinator. Two other veterans having heard about the study and meeting the selection criteria contacted directly the research coordinator and were recruited. To account for the lack of training standards and governmental certification, we ensure that dogs' training regimen varied widely across dog training schools in designing the sampling method to reduce confounding variables.

2.3. Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992) by a single research professional through telephone interviews of 30–45 min duration. Following an interview guide, the researcher explained the purposes of the study and data collection methods; verbal consent was obtained. The possibility to schedule another telephone meeting was offered if additional time was needed to think about answers. The interview questionnaire was developed in French and in English and included four researcher-driven domains addressing the "usability" of the PsySD: 1-actual use of the PsySD (tasks/activities realized with/by the service dog, contexts, intensity and frequency), 2-perceived advantages/disadvantages and environmental impacts, 3-problems, difficulties and obstacles with the PsySD, and 4-recommendations to improve PsySD programs and accessibility. At the end of the interview, socio-demographic questions were asked. Participants were interviewed individually to ensure confidentiality and create a context where participants felt comfortable and safe to disclose their lived experiences (Carter & Lubinsky, 2011). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed word by word, creating the verbatim.

2.4. Data analysis

For content analysis, data from the verbatim were categorized following the principles of thematic qualitative analysis (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knalf, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006; DePoy & Gitlin, 2011; Thomas,

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