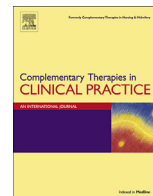




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What motivates arrangements of dog visits in nursing homes? Experiences by dog handlers and nurses

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Dog visits to nursing homes are used as a structured approach for enhancing residents' well-being. Few studies have emphasized the perspectives of the organizers. The purpose of the present study was to gain insight into the experiences of volunteer dog handlers and nurses involved in dog visits to nursing homes, focusing on what motivated them to contribute and identifying possible factors to successful dog visits.

Methods: Individual, in-depth interviews with eight dog handlers and group interviews with 10 nurses from four nursing homes.

Results: Feelings of meaningfulness and joy motivated both the dog handlers and nurses to arrange dog visits to nursing homes. Successful visits depended on shared information and collaboration.

Conclusion: Both groups were motivated by the positive impact of dog visits on nursing home residents. Dog visits may be health-promoting not only for residents, but for the volunteer dog handlers as well.

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1. Introduction

This article describes experiences with a dog visit program in Norwegian nursing homes, from the perspectives of the dog handlers and nurses who organize these visits.

Caring for older people in nursing homes is complex. The residence is their home, but their daily living is dependent on help from others. Around 80% of nursing home residents suffer from dementia [1]. Research shows that nursing home residents miss social contact and meaningful activities [2], which challenges nurses and other health personnel to create alternative therapeutic, stimulating environments for this patient group.

There is an emphasis on nonpharmacological approaches to improve nursing home residents' quality of life [3]. Several complementary therapies have evolved, including music therapy, therapeutic gardening, intergenerational relations and animal-assisted interventions (AAI). AAI consists of structured and goal-oriented incorporation of animals in services for either therapeutic gains or improved health and wellness [4]. In animal-assisted activities (AAA), companion animals are taken by their human

handlers to facilities such as nursing homes for “meet and greet” activities, which can provide physical activity, engagement and a lighter mood among residents with dementia [5]. Dog handlers involved in AAA are volunteers without any educational requirements, which distinguishes them from animal-assisted therapy (AAT), in which handlers are required to have an educational background and experience in health care services [6].

Several reviews focusing AAI with elderly patients affected by dementia have been completed [7–11]. These reviews show that AAI improves depression, social functioning, communication, and coping. AAI also has a calming effect on agitated behavior, enhances quality of social interactions, and has benefits for apathy and problematic behaviors. However, another systematic review of patient benefits from dog-assisted interventions in health care showed that the majority of studies had no significant effect [4].

Some Norwegian researches on dog visits to nursing homes have been completed; although there have been positive impacts on residents' quality of life and depression, there are fewer effects reported for agitation [5,12,13].

The presence of animals in nursing homes not only affects residents' well-being, but also that of their care professionals [14,15]. In a study of nurses and auxiliary nurses in three nursing homes in which complementary and alternative therapies (e.g., music, aromatherapy, animals) were used, the nurses reported interest in and excitement about these therapies, but stated that they lacked

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knowledge about them [16].

The dog visits on which this study is based were defined as AAA and took place with groups of three to five residents in a suitable room (usually a living room), along with a certified equipage (dog and dog handler) and at least one employee (often a nurse or nursing assistant). The handlers planned and led the visits. Two equipages visited a nursing home every other week over a period of two years, with each visit lasting one hour.

In Norway, dog handlers are volunteers who are trained either at schools or voluntary organizations such as the Red Cross. After a suitability test, the dog and handler are certified. A Swedish study [6] focusing on dog handlers found that they experienced positive feelings from visiting persons with dementia, sensing that the dog provided a respite in the burden of illness. However, research focusing on the experiences of either care professionals or dog handlers at nursing homes are scarce. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to gain insight into the experiences of volunteer dog handlers and nurses who are involved in dog visits to nursing homes, focusing on what motivated them to contribute and identify possible factors to successful dog visits.

2. Materials and methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative design. Individual in-depth interviews [17] were chosen for use with the dog handlers and group interviews were chosen for use with the nurses. The researchers also attended two dog visit sessions.

2.1. Sample

An information folder was compiled and distributed by the volunteer organization (Red Cross) to dog handlers who had been certified as equipage and had experience with leading dog visits to nursing homes for at least six months. In the folder, the dog handlers were informed about the study and asked to participate in an individual interview. Eight dog handlers accepted the invitation. A similar information folder was sent to leaders at four nursing homes that received regular dog visits from Red Cross volunteers. The leaders distributed the folders to their nurses who had attended at least two dog visits at the institution. Nurses at the same workplace were interviewed as a group. Ten nurses accepted the invitation.

2.2. Data collection

Prior to the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was prepared. For the dog handlers, the questions focused how they arranged the visits, what they experienced at the nursing home, and possible challenges. For the nurses, the questions concerned their perceptions of the impact the visits had on the residents, how they arranged for the visits, and possible challenges. The individual interviews lasted about 30 min and group interviews lasted about one hour, which resulted in a total of 80 pages of transcribed text.

2.3. Data analysis

The transcribed text was analyzed using an inductive approach that, according to Malterud [18] consists of meaning condensation, categorization, and thematization. Analysis was divided into four steps: (i) reading all the material to obtain an overall impression and noting preconceptions; (ii) identifying units of meaning and coding various aspects of participants' experiences; (iii) condensing and abstracting the meaning within each of the coded groups; and (iv) summarizing the contents of each code group to generalize descriptions and concepts to a main theme reflecting participants'

most important experiences.

Both authors participated in all four steps of the analysis process. The transcribed text was first read to gain an overall impression of the topics that were most important to the participants. All text was then coded, sorted, and reviewed again. Each quotation with the same content was combined and condensed, and some quotations were highlighted to serve as illustrations. Finally, each quotation was categorized under specific themes. Previous research, relevant theory, and the authors' preunderstanding were used to critically interpret the participants' contributions and gain a deeper understanding of the results. The empirical material includes the quotations shown in the Results that represent the participants' reflections during their interviews.

2.4. Ethical considerations

The study was approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (ref. no. 48655). All informants were provided written information about the study design, their rights of anonymity and confidentiality, and the option to quit participating in the study at any time. Prior to interviews, each informant signed a statement of consent.

In qualitative studies, it is important to let one's own perceptions about the subject be transparent and to have a reflective attitude and approach to research [18]. In this study, the two researchers were both nurses, one with specialization in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and the other with specialization in health promotion. Both have dogs and positive perceptions about relationships between humans and dogs. Neither has worked with dog visits in nursing homes or had previous experience with AAA.

3. Results

All the dog handlers had at least one year of experience as a volunteer after being certified, and they had committed to carrying out one dog visit every other week at a specific nursing home. Six of the dog handlers had work experience within the health care sector. Five of the nurses had 5–9 years of work experience, the other five had 15–24 years. None of the nurses had been educated in AAI.

In the following, the dog handlers' and nurses' experiences are presented. Most of the findings were related to benefits of these visits to the nursing home residents (see Fig. 1).

3.1. Dog handlers

3.1.1. Feeling useful for the benefit of the residents

The dog handlers experienced several positive outcomes for the residents' benefit during their visits to the nursing homes. The residents expressed joy when the dog entered the room, and some remembered the dog's name from previous visits.

I see an incredible joy. Several times when we have come, one of the residents has been sad, depressed. (...) but once we are there, everything is okay.

When they see the dog, most of them become happy and are smiling.

Even if they have bad short-term memory, they remember the name of the dog.

The dog handlers highlighted that physical contact between the residents and dog was the residents' opportunity to cuddle. Some

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