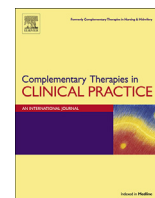




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Perceptions of a hospital-based animal assisted intervention program: An exploratory study



Kathleen Abrahamson^{a,*}, Yun Cai^a, Elizabeth Richards^a, Krista Cline^b,
Marguerite E. O'Haire^c

^a Purdue University School of Nursing, 502N, University Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, United States

^b Butler University, Indianapolis, IN, United States

^c Purdue University School of Veterinary Science, West Lafayette, IN, United States

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that there are multiple benefits of animal assisted interventions for patients. However, the impact of interaction with these animals in staff is understudied, particularly in the acute care setting, and is thus a novel contribution to the literature on human-animal interaction. The purpose of this qualitative pilot study was to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding the experiences and perceptions of hospital staff who have participated in a hospital-based animal assisted intervention program. Nine face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted (4 staff nurses, 3 support staff members, and 2 hospital volunteers). Five themes emerged from the respondent interviews: (1) descriptions of the therapy dogs; (2) contacts with the dogs at work; (3) connection with the dogs outside of work; (4) benefits; (5) drawbacks. Our findings reflect abundantly positive hospital staff experiences.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing research has been conducted on the effects of interactions with animals. Research has shown that there can be multiple outcomes, including physiological, psychological, and social benefits of animal-assisted interventions in a wide range of settings [13]. Studies have shown that having a companion animal can help to reduce the cardiovascular effects of stress during laboratory experiments [1]. Animal-assisted therapy has been shown to benefit individuals in other ways as well. Children and adults have shown reduced anxiety, reduced depression, and reduced social isolation when interacting with a therapy animal in single time point studies in schools, clinics, and laboratory settings [7]. However, we tend to see that health fields, especially in the acute care setting, have been slow to assess and recognize these benefits and the importance of bonds with animals [16].

One setting of particular interest is the hospital setting, given the growing prevalence of visiting therapy animals and the high stress nature of the hospital environment. Patients may experience short-term stress during their transient stays, yet hospital staff such

as nurses and other support staff are continually exposed to this environment. Indeed, the issue of work related stress and stress management in the area of nursing has been an area of examination for decades [10]. The stress that nurses experience is detrimental not only for the nurse who may experience physical, mental, or emotional symptoms [17], but can also put patients at risk [Fresco, 2000]. Multiple stress management techniques have been proposed, ranging from managing the work environment to reducing external sources of stress, to managing the individuals' interpersonal factors [10].

Given the positive outcomes of animal-assisted intervention in other areas, we extended this work to focus on the effects for hospital staff and volunteers, particularly in acute care settings. One of the reasons we may see limited use of animal assisted intervention in the acute care field is the perception of infection control issues as well as staff burden issues. With respect to infection control, when appropriate protocols and guidelines for animals visits are in place, hygiene issues are easily eliminated [11]. However, the effect of animal-assisted intervention on staff burden and stress has received little empirical attention thus was the focus of this study.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kaabraha@purdue.edu (K. Abrahamson).

2. Statement of purpose

The purpose of this exploratory pilot study was to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding the experiences and perceptions of hospital staff and volunteers in acute settings who have participated in a hospital animal assisted intervention program.

3. Study context

The context of this study was a 180-bed medical and surgical community hospital located within a medium sized Midwestern metropolitan area. At the time of data collection the animal assisted intervention program, administered by the hospital's department of volunteer services, was three years old. All of the animals participating in the program at time of data collection were dogs, and each dog and handler were required to achieve accredited therapy dog status from Therapy Dogs International, a national therapy dog accrediting agency. Animals provided services in reception areas, surgical waiting rooms, the emergency department, and medical/surgical units (including pediatrics) as requested by staff members and patients. Animal rounds occurred mostly during daytime hours, and at least weekly but not daily. Schedules were established to match handler availability. The stated purpose of the program was to “enhance the experience of patients and visitors” (www.XYZ.org).

4. Methods

Nine face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted by an Adult Nurse Practitioner from the research team between August 2015 and November 2015. Interviews were conducted at the hospital site that was implementing the pet therapy program, and were recorded for transcription. Identifying information was removed from transcripts prior to analysis. Interview respondents included 4 staff nurses that worked on units where the animals were present; 3 hospital staff members who interacted with the animals in the course of their workday (welcome desk receptionist, unit clerk, program manager), and 2 hospital volunteers. Respondents were identified through a list of names of persons who had frequent workplace interactions with the animals provided by the hospital volunteer director. An email request was sent and volunteers participated in the interview. The study was designed as an exploratory pilot and convenience sampling methods were selected. As such, it is possible that the volunteer nature of sampling rejected positive bias into our findings. This pilot study was approved by the IRB of author institutions.

Transcripts were thematically analyzed using NVIVO 11 software. Analyses were guided by an inductive content analysis approach. Themes were not developed prior to analysis but instead were allowed to emerge from the data. It should be noted, however, that the 22-item interview guide asked directly about contact with the animals and perceptions of those contacts, and as such influenced the themes that emerged from interview responses. Although probes were utilized to follow-up upon responses, the interviews did not substantially deviate from the interview guide. The interview guide centered upon the domains of frequency of contact, nature of contact, perception of contact's influence on their daily experience, and perception of contact's influence on the overall hospital environment. Respondents were also asked to describe examples of experiences with the animals that they perceived as particularly noteworthy. Transcripts were first analyzed independently by authors YC and KA. Themes were discussed and agreed upon, then transcripts were reviewed to assure that the identified text was consistent with the agreed upon themes. Five themes and 3 sub-themes were identified.

5. Findings

Five themes emerged from the respondent interviews: (1) descriptions of the therapy dogs; (2) contacts with the dogs at work; (3) connection with the dogs outside of work; (4) benefits; (5) drawbacks. The sub-set of the theme “benefits” consisted of: (1) decreasing staff stress; (2) promoting social interactions and interaction with patients; and (3) providing comfort and company to patients.

5.1. Descriptions of the dogs

The therapy animals in this program were all dogs, and each of the respondents described themselves as someone who likes dogs during the course of the interview. When asked to describe their contact with the animals they frequently spoke in descriptive terms, such as: “a big, white fluffy dog ... so adorable”; “... like a teddy bear”; “gentle and so sweet”; “gentle eyes”; warm and fuzzy”.

5.2. Contact with the dogs at work

Most respondents noted they had contact with the dogs once or twice a week and that individual time spent with the animals was generally under 15 min per visit. All respondents stated that they would have physical contacts with the therapy dogs every time the animals came to their working area. Most described feeling excited about the animal visits and made efforts to see and have physical contacts with the dogs. Respondent comments included:

“I ... go see them unless I am really busy.”

“We always pet them.”

“... we will seek them out if we see them”

“I'd always try to stay a little bit late so I could see [the dog].”

“I try to get as much contact as I possibly can.”

“I've got to see a patient; will you guys just wait for a few minutes? I just need so bad to give so and so a hug.' Whichever dog is here, even our hospitalist will come out into the hallways and just spend that time with the patients and talk about their dogs.”

Sometimes, respondents noted missing the therapy dogs when they were not present:

“If we missed him and he wasn't here for a week, we would be like, ‘hey what's going on?’”.

“Several of the nurses and I ... will talk about some of the older ones that we haven't seen in a while.”

5.3. Connection with the dogs outside of work

Respondents relayed instances where they had talked or thought about the animals outside of work hours, often with their family, friends or neighbors:

“... we talk with [our neighbor] all the time about Teddy”

“I talk about [the dogs] with my kids”

“I will tell stories to people ... ‘Hey, I was at work and Teddy came to visit or this big Great Dane came to visit’. I will tell people how good the program is and I will wonder what those

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