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Pet Therapy and the Associated Benefits on the Elderly

By

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Bachelors of Science in Nursing, University of North Dakota, 2009

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PERMISSION

Title Pet Therapy and the Associated Benefits on the elderly
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Signature Lindsey Lutzwick *Lindsey Lutzwick*

Date April 10, 2013

Abstract

Pet therapy (also known as Animal Assisted Therapy {AAT}) today involves both human and animal interactions. Pet therapy is utilized most commonly with the elderly living in Long Term Care (LTC) facilities or assisted living facilities to promote health and healing for the patients. It is especially beneficial for those who are chronically ill, may suffer from disabilities or may have depression. The feeling of isolation and loneliness that accompanies depression is not healthy, especially for the elderly population. Research has shown that the health and well-being of the elderly who suffer from depression, decline rapidly when compared to those elderly that stay active, are frequently around people, or who have pets at home.

Studies have suggested that pet therapy provides several benefits for the elderly at home and in LTC facilities. Pet therapy has been shown to have a positive effect on social behavior; as well as improving the quality of life for the elderly living in LTC facilities. The purpose of this project is to design an effective pet therapy program for cognitively intact elders living in a LTC setting.

Pet Therapy and the Associated Benefits on the Elderly

Introduction

Dating back centuries ago, animals have been viewed as both enjoyable and lovable, and many animals have been seen as loyal companions. Pets have proven to bring joy and happiness into a person's life, which is why pet therapy is the animal's unconditional love to human beings (Kawamura & Niiyama, 2009). Pet therapy has been studied for more than 40 years when pets were brought into nursing homes. As health care professionals began to notice the benefits of visiting pets interacting with patients, therapists began incorporating pet therapy into their treatment plans (Buono, Smania, & Raviola, 2005). Today, pet therapy has been used to provide motivation, encouragement, and interaction within group settings (Soprano, 2010).

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According to the American Humane Association, the use of pet therapy has reduced stress in patients resulting in healthier blood pressure and lowered anxiety levels (Buono et al., 2005). It has also shown to improve patient's moods, resulting in better compliance from patients. Pet therapy has proven to improve the quality of life for the elderly residents in LTC facilities and research suggests that it is an effective tool when working with the elderly, both from a physical and an emotional perspective (Soprano, 2010).

For the elderly residing in LTC facilities or assisted living facilities, pet therapy is used to promote health and healing. It is especially affective for those who are chronically ill, have disabilities, and/or suffer from depression (Soprano, 2010). Research has shown that the health and well-being of the elderly who suffer from depression, decline rapidly compared to the elderly who stay active, are frequently around people or who have pets at home (Banks, 2011).

Studies have suggested that pet therapy provides several benefits for the elderly residing in LTC facilities (Buono et al., 2005). A study performed by Banks (2011) indicated that the elderly patients who received pet therapy had reduced blood pressure, lower anxiety levels, and higher levels of neuro-hormones. In studying pain levels it was found that patients with pain that spent 20 minutes with a dog, showed over a 30% decrease in pain levels, compared to those patients who received a human visitor or those who received no outside interaction. In addition, the study revealed that pet therapy was cost effective and when given the options, elderly residents preferred animal therapy over a human volunteer, when given the option (Banks, 2011).

Purpose

When older adults enter a LTC setting and become unable to perform the tasks they used to do, their disabilities may be exacerbated by feelings of loneliness and instability (Soprano, 2010). Some of the primary concerns regarding the older adult's mental health are confusion, aggression, and depression. This project's purpose was to develop an effective pet therapy program for cognitively intact elders living in a LTC setting.

Through both physical and emotional evidence pet therapy has proven effective in increasing the quality of life for the elderly, as well as an effective tool when working with the elderly living in LTC facilities. In addition, many researchers have found that interaction with animals have been shown to have a positive effect on the elderly by increasing their social behavior and verbal interaction (Kawamura & Niiyama, 2009).

Significance

Having a positive affect through the interaction of animals can have a significant impact on the health of many individuals (Soprano, 2010). One study involving pet therapy with geriatric patients reported decreased blood pressure, heart rate, and depression, as well as increased life satisfaction (Kawamura & Niiyama, 2009). Other researchers have demonstrated that older adults' interaction with dogs led to spontaneous utterances, laughing, and happy facial expressions (Banks, 2011).

Healthcare providers in multiple settings encounter patients with a multitude of psychological and medical issues. A multidisciplinary approach with a variety of treatment strategies is beneficial to a therapeutic setting. Animals have long been associated with positive effects on patients in a variety of health care settings. When animals were first introduced in health care, they were usually brought in for visits and used in social settings. Currently, animals

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are included in treatment programming and are part of the multidisciplinary care provided to patients in long term care facilities (Banks, 2011).

AAT is an adjunct treatment approach that has great potential for care and healing and is becoming an increasingly common therapeutic intervention (Banks, 2011). An overabundance of literature supports that, in general, patients involved in AAT have a notable improvement in their ability to communicate, interact, and socialize with others.

Reliable and valid research supports the physical, emotional, and physiological effects of pet therapy in LTC facilities. The elderly patients who received pet therapy had reduced blood pressure, lower anxiety levels, and higher levels of neuro-hormones. Pet therapy has been shown to have a positive effect on social behavior; as well as improving the quality of life for the elderly living in LTC facilities. Through pet therapy, healthcare providers are able to provide quality care to their patients while preserving their optimal function and identity.

Many researchers have found that while communication with animals can have a positive effect on older adults by increasing their social behavior and verbal interaction, pet therapy can also decrease agitated behavior and loneliness (Banks, 2011). Pet therapy can be delivered in a variety of different settings by specially trained professionals in association with animals that meet specific criteria.

Theoretical Framework

It is important for healthcare providers caring for the elderly patients in LTC facilities to provide not only physical care but also physiological care. Providing physiological care allows the healthcare provider to offer the necessary comfort and support to instill feelings of happiness in their patients. They must provide individualized care that helps them to consider each patient's

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particular characteristics and desires and helping instill the patients with a feeling that they have something to live for.

The *Conservation Model* is an important nursing theory that integrates the importance of conservation through establishing adaptive pathways by incorporating animal therapy into the daily lives of the elderly. The *Conservation Model* theory emphasis is on illustrating the concepts in regards to person, environment, nursing, and health. The theory highlights that the environment completes the wholeness of the person and that nursing promotes adaptation and optimal wholeness for that person (Wiley, 1997).

The *Conservation Model* can be integrated into the care provided to the elderly as pet therapy allows nurses to provide a nurturing environment to adequately meet the physiological needs of the residents. The *Conservation Model* illustrates the importance of conserving the personal integrity of the person by having the individual retain a sense of self. This nursing theory illustrates the importance for the individual to conserve their social integrity and with that build new relationships between themselves and the people they encounter. These principles are imperative to apply as they build the foundation for the individual to achieve their optimal well-being (McEwen & Wills, 1997).

As nurses, with the combination of both our knowledge and compassion, we can help promote adaptation through the benefits of pet therapy. In pet therapy, the animals may serve many roles, including acting as a companion, a social facilitator, or a substitute for close interpersonal relationships (Buono et al., 2005). In addition, they also provide emotional support, reinforce feelings of independence, and stimulate awareness which assist in maintaining an adequate adaptation response.

Long term care- the provision of medical, social, and personal care services on a recurring or continuing basis to persons with chronic physical or mental disorders. The care may be provided in environments ranging from institutions to private homes. Long-term care services usually include symptomatic treatment, maintenance, and rehabilitation for patients of all age groups (Medical Dictionary, 2011).

Pet therapy-Animal-assisted therapy (AAT), also known as pet therapy, utilizes trained animals and handlers to achieve specific physical, social, cognitive, and emotional goals with patients (Medical Dictionary, 2011).

Process

Search strategies.

The databases used to locate appropriate articles related to pet therapy were accessed through PubMed and CINAHL, both online internet engines. Search terms and words utilized to conduct the search for articles included elderly, nursing home, and pet therapy or animal therapy. Included in the review of literature search were articles from the United States and article written in English. Research articles beyond 10 years were not included.

Evidence grading.

Reliable and valid reviews must be used to monitor the quality of the data from the articles. The grading scheme utilized to determine the quality and content of the collected literature was the American Association of Critical Care Nurses (AACN) Levels of Evidence. The AACN was one of the first nursing organizations to use a hierarchical rating system to grade levels of evidence. The original rating system was developed in 1993 and offered practitioners a system to distinguish between various types of available evidence (Armola, Board, & Halm,

2009). The new AACN Levels of Evidence is now commonly utilized by organizations. Research designs identified in the leveling system includes meta-synthesis (the qualitative counterpart to meta-analysis), randomized and nonrandomized studies, qualitative research, descriptive studies, systematic reviews, and integrative reviews (Armola et al., 2009). Non-research evidence includes peer-reviewed professional organizational standards and case reports as well as expert opinion and manufacturers' recommendations. Meta-analyses and meta-syntheses are placed as the highest levels of evidence (Armola et al., 2009). The AACN grading tool (Armola et al., 2009) criteria was used to grade levels of evidence for utilizing the study in practice. These levels of evidence include:

Level A -Meta-analysis of multiple controlled studies or meta-synthesis of qualitative studies with results that consistently support a specific action, intervention or treatment;

Level B -Well designed controlled studies, both randomized and nonrandomized, with results that consistently support a specific action, intervention, or treatment;

Level C -Qualitative studies, descriptive or correlational studies, integrative reviews, systematic reviews, or randomized controlled trials with inconsistent results;

Level D -Peer-reviewed professional organizational standards, with clinical studies to support recommendations Theory-based evidence from expert opinion or multiple case reports;

Level E -Theory-based evidence from expert opinion or multiple case reports;

Level M- Manufacturers' recommendations only (Armola et al., 2009, p. 72).

Review of Literature

Pet therapy is offered in a wide variety of settings. Through the analysis and interpretation of the positive outcomes of pet therapy found in literature, the research found provides a useful framework for facilitating pet therapy within the nursing home setting. Studies of the human-companion animal bond reveal many physiological and psychological benefits (Velde, Cipriana, & Fisher, 2005). Furthermore, relationships with animals can facilitate learning, provide comfort, promote a sense of safety and improve self-esteem (Velde et al., 2005). Research studies have revealed the importance animals provide in creating a nurturing living environment. Furthermore, the social environment is impacted favorably by the presence of animals, facilitating communication and conversation (Banks, 2011).

Increasing the recognition of the intrinsic value of pet therapy within the nursing home setting is an important step in contributing to the welfare of the elderly. As a result of this project, it is the author's belief, that it would be important to implement pet therapy programs within the nursing home settings through adequate preparation and extensive discussion with those involved with the process.

Long Term Care.

Today, pet therapy has been used to provide motivation, encouragement, and interaction within group settings and also has been found to reduce stress in patients resulting in a healthier blood pressure and lowered anxiety levels. Banks (2011) conducted a study using randomized and non-randomized control groups to illustrate the benefits of pet therapy on 45 residents within a nursing home setting. The research study was conducted in three LTC facilities in a city in southern Mississippi. Three instruments were used within the study, the Mini-Mental State Examination, the Demographic and Pet History Questionnaire, and the UCLA-LS. The results of this study showed that pet therapy can effectively reduce the loneliness of residents in LTC

facilities who wish to receive such therapy, although this study showed no direct correlation with lowered blood pressure or lowered levels of anxiety. (Grade level B).

Buono, Smania, and Raviola (2005) assessed whether a pet therapy program would have a favorable effect on the psychological status and the quality of life in the elderly. The article illustrates the benefits of pet therapy by a study conducted on 144 elderly residents. The research study was conducted in seven different nursing homes in Italy and the participants were randomly divided into three groups. At the beginning of the study, the participants were administered the mini mental state examination to assess their cognitive status, the LEIPAD II-Short Version to gauge subjective perception of quality of life in the elderly, and the brief symptom inventory for self-evaluation of the presence of psychological symptoms (Buono et al., 2005). Over the course of three months, the first group received no intervention, the second group was given a plant, and the third group was given a canary. Animal therapy consisted of the elderly group who took care of the canary. This group was instructed on the responsibilities needed to care for the bird. At the end of the three-month trial, the tests that were previously given at the beginning of the study were re-administered. In addition, to avoid being influenced in any way, or information being distorted during the test administration, psychologists were kept blind on whether residents received an animal or a plant. The results of this study showed that pet therapy did have a beneficial effect on the psychological well-being of the elderly population, in particular on aspects related to depressive symptoms and the perception of quality of life. This study showed that those elderly taking care of an animal appeared to have lowered anxiety levels and were more autonomously able to carry on social relations compared to the group that received no intervention and the group that received a plant. (Grade level B).

The benefits of pet therapy was illustrated by a study Kawamura and Niiyama (2009) conducted on eight elderly Japanese women within a nursing home setting. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews. The participant's oral descriptions of their experiences were

analyzed based on Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology. Pet therapy consisted of interaction with the same dog over the span of a two year period. The participants were allowed contact with the dog for up to two times per week. The results of this study indicated that when participants interacted and/or communicated with the dog, positive emotional feelings were elicited. Researchers found that through the interaction with the dog, it became an avenue for the participants to relive stress. This study gave evidence to the participants' positive outlook on life increased after the pet therapy intervention. (Grade level B).

A study conducted by Moretti, Bernabei, Ferrari, and Negretti (2010) illustrated the benefits of pet therapy conducted on 21 residents within a nursing home setting. A brief questionnaire concerning self-perceived quality of life was administered to all the participants. The entire assessment was carried out by a trained physician, blind to both cases and controls. The intervention lasted six weeks and consisted of pet therapy interaction that lasted ninety minutes per week. The case participants were required to hold, stroke, and walk with the pet, under the supervision of the dog educator. The control participants were allowed to see the pets enter the nursing home but were not allowed to interact with them. Two instruments were used within the study, the Mini-Mental State Examination and the Geriatric Depression Scale. The results of this study showed a positive effect on self-perceived quality of life with all the participants within the case study group. The results of this study showed that animal assisted therapy can effectively reduce the loneliness of residents in long-term care facilities who wish to receive such therapy. (Grade level C).

Coakley and Mahoney (2009) illustrated the efficacy of a pet therapy program in improving physiological, behavioral, and experiential outcomes with nursing home residents. The research study was conducted in a LTC facility with 59 participants involved. Two days per week the participants interacted with a dog and immediately prior to the visit, vital signs and both pain and energy levels were completed with each participant. Patient's perception of pain

and level of energy were measured initially and throughout the study to show interventional response to pet therapy. At the end of the study, three open-ended questions were asked to capture the participant's perceptions about their experience with the dog. The results of this study showed that the participants felt more calm, relaxed, and energetic while valuing the experience. Although this study showed no direct correlation with lowered blood pressure, participants reported improved levels of pain and energy. (Grade level B).

The benefits of pet therapy on the psychological status and the quality of life in the elderly were conducted in a study by Stasi, Costa, and Resta (2003). The study was conducted in a LTC facility with 28 elderly residents participating in the study. The participants were assigned to a pet therapy intervention group, consisting of approximately one-hour visits for 6 weeks with a cat three times per week. The results of this study showed that patients with animal interaction had improved depressive symptoms and a significant decrease in blood pressure values. (Grade level B).

Prosser, Townsend, and Staiger (2008) illustrated the benefits of pet therapy in a study conducted on eighteen participants resided in a LTC facility. The research study consisted of a visiting campaign animal program conducted in one hour a week sessions over a six-week period. Each session involved a visitation from a variety of different animals. The animals were managed by two experienced volunteers. Also present within the visitation room was a researcher and two nursing staff. Baseline data was collected through a pre-intervention questionnaire. The study's main aim was to measure and assess depression experienced by the participants. The survey instrument chosen to measure symptoms of depression was the Geriatric Depression Scale. Participants were observed throughout the six-week intervention. Following the completion of the six-week intervention, a post-intervention questionnaire was completed by the participants. The results of this study showed that animal therapy increased social interaction between the nursing home residents. Post-intervention questions showed that

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the residents enjoyed the contact with the animals and the happiness it brought into their lives.

This study indicated that the residents involved stated that the program promoted communication and increased their social interaction. (Grade level B).

The role of animals providing social support and enhancing the quality of life for older people was the subject of a study by Dono (2005). The research study was conducted over a six month time frame and consisted of 60 nursing home residents. Both pre- and post-tests questionnaires were used to see the influence pet therapy had on the participants. The study reported positive effects on many of the participants and most voiced they had a greater joy for living. An unexpected finding was a reduction in staff workload. It was observed that the elderly patients provided the opportunity to interact with an animal was shown to be less demanding with the medical staff. This clinical study supported recommendations for the use of pet therapy. (Grade level B).

Ruckdeschel and Haitsma (2001) illustrated the benefits of pet therapy by conducting a pilot longitudinal study using dogs, cats, birds, and plants. The study took six months to complete, with a sample size of 26 residents in a large urban nursing home. The assessments consisted of resident interviews and behavioral observations conducted at the beginning of the study and after the sixth month completion. Residents were also administered the Mini-Mental Status Exam. In addition, the "pet attitude survey" was given to the residents before, during, and after the study. This survey was an eighteen item measure that allowed residents to express their attitudes towards pets. Residents overall quality of life was also measured using the "quality of life scale." The results of this study indicated that pet therapy can effectively reduce the loneliness of residents in LTC facilities and showed lowered levels of anxiety. (Grade level B).

Martindale (2008) assessed whether a pet therapy program would have a favorable effect on the psychological status and the quality of life in the elderly residents residing in rural nursing homes. The study was conducted on 20 rural nursing homes during a span of six weeks. Each

nursing home received five, one-hour sessions either with pets or with other therapy interventions. Both pre- and post-test questionnaires were used to see the influence pet therapy had on the nursing home residents. The results of this study indicated that animal assisted therapy did have a beneficial effect on the psychological well-being of the elderly population. A significant decrease in passive behaviors and significantly improved mood was noted among those who participated in the pet therapy control group. The traditional recreation therapy control group also did show improvements but none were as significant as the pet therapy control group. Although the design study was not randomized, the clinical study supported recommendations for the use of pet therapy even though more evidence would need to be gathered to support this conclusion. (Grade level C).

Greer and Putsay (2002) assessed whether a pet therapy program would have a favorable effect on the psychological status and the quality of life in the elderly living in nursing homes. The article illustrates the benefits of pet therapy by a study conducted on 6 elderly residents. The AACN Levels of Evidence was used to grade this article. The six participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Informed consents were obtained for each participant. Prior to the initiation to either a live or toy animal, each participant's verbal communication was assessed. The examiner remained a passive communicator throughout the interaction process and the examiner did not initiate conversation. After each session, the examiner scored the verbal communication components for each participant from the video tape recording. The first intervention phase consisted of two toy cats and this phase consisted of three ten-minute sessions. The second intervention phase consisted of two live cats and this phase consisted of three ten-minute sessions. After the initial baseline, Group 1 received the toy cat intervention phase. Group 1 then received the first withdrawal phase followed by the live cat intervention phase and a second withdrawal phase. In the toy cat condition, average subject performance for total words gradually decreased across baseline while when the live cats were present, average

total words increased across baseline. Average total words were greater during the live cat intervention than in the toy cat intervention. In the live cat trials, the average production of total words, and initiations increased compared to baseline. In addition, it was noted that the subjects often communicated to the examiners and the stimuli. Although this study showed no direct correlation with lowered blood pressure, those elderly interacting with a live cat appeared to be more autonomously able to carry on social relations compared to those who interacted with a toy cat. (Grade level B).

Four other studies were identified in the review of literature that evaluated the importance of pet therapy in LTC facilities. The studies were conducted in 1984, 1990, 1994 and 1996. Due to the age of the research they were not included in the review of literature discussion; although it is important that research on pet therapy has been conducted for almost 30 years.

Summary of Literature.

From the review of literature, it appeared that the majority of individuals participating in the various studies bonded with the animals and become comfortable with the pet therapy programs set up within the LTC facilities. The programs helped the elderly escape the stress of their everyday lives and most of the elderly participants became relaxed at the sessions. Within the studies, the participants were able to build a bond with the animals they encountered and from their experiences most developed feelings of joy and confidence. Most of the participants within the studies created a nurturing relationship with the animal they encountered and some even perceived themselves as having a special role in the animal's life. As the elderly participant's relationship with the animals deepened, their interests and attitudes began to spread to other individuals. The pet therapy sessions helped to broaden the elders' interaction with other participants but also increased their mood and outlook on life. The encounter with the animals brought a change of life into the resident's daily routine and helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness but rather helped the residents find happiness.

Discussion

It is very important to educate the staff within the facilities about the benefits of pet therapy. Many of the activities within nursing homes are group orientated and do not always meet the needs at the individual level. Through information obtained from the literature, the idea of creating a poster to distribute to the LTC facilities was created.

A poster was designed that illustrated the benefits of pet therapy and the positive effects it had on the overall health of the residents found within the research analyzed. A presentation of the poster was performed in a LTC facility in Bismarck, ND. The poster was presented to the nursing staff within the LTC facility. Along with the presentation of the poster, education was performed for the staff on the findings found in the literature review; which included the benefits pets provide such as lowering blood pressure, helping to improve both physical and mental stimulation, and brightening the resident's emotional outlook on life. The nursing staff responded very positively to the information that was presented. The LTC facility chosen uses pet therapy and most recently adopted a dog to be a permanent pet therapy dog for the residents within the facility. The staff were firm believers on the positive effects pets play on the residents' lives. They are very excited to make the adopted dog a permanent part of the LTC facility and eager to see the lasting effects it will have on the residents' livelihood.

Practice Recommendations

The first practice recommendation is to ensure the safety of pet therapy within a LTC facility. This could be accomplished through staff education regarding pet therapy. Staff education should stress that the interaction with an animal helps to create a pathway for the participants' to express themselves. The education would consist of the advantages of pet therapy and how it can be used as a complementary therapy for the residents. Nurse educators could come into a facility and educate the staff about the methods, techniques, benefits, and risks of

how pet therapy can be part of a nurse's plan of care. Gaining understanding and approval within the facility and even expanding that knowledge within the nursing curriculum by providing research and support can help initiate the implementation of pet therapy within areas such as LTC facilities (Banks, 2011). Staff education should stress that the interaction with an animal helps to create a pathway for the participants' to express themselves. It would be important to illustrate the fact that as the nursing staff at a LTC facility they have the opportunities and means to change the environment of nursing homes and provide the primary care necessary to improve the residents' outlook on life.

The second practice recommendation would include integrating a pet animal visitation policy in order to extend pet therapy into the practice of nursing. Once an assessment has been completed to ensure that a specific facility would benefit from pet therapy program, the multidisciplinary team lead by the advanced practice nurse would establish and identify goals for the patients. In addition, it is also imperative to gain acceptance from administration, staff, and patients. It would be essential to review legal considerations and acquire the necessary resources available to implement a pet therapy program and concurring policies (Kawamura & Niiyama, 2009).

Conclusion

Pet therapy provides an activity that all nursing home residents can engage in at an individual level. Although LTC facilities provide an environment for residents to maintain their social abilities, many of these activities are group orientated and do not necessarily always meet the needs on an individual level. Pet therapy has helped create a pathway for residents in LTC facilities to not only express themselves but also to gain a sense of having a special role in the lives of the animal through their long-term relationship. To fully appreciate the experiences pet

therapy has to offer, it is important that nurses along with other support staff maintain a close contact with those who run the pet therapy program in order for the elderly to develop their full potential through this kind of activity. The result of pet therapy is a practice of care in which the elderly can make full use of their abilities such as an increase in positive feelings, increased confidence in oneself, reduced blood pressure, and interacting with other residents' through the animals. The participants in the various LTC facilities were positively influenced by pet therapy as the interaction with the animals provided these residents with a change from their daily life. In addition, this activity was particularly important to the LTC residents as it made them feel refreshed and also gave them opportunities to broaden their contact with society.

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