Old man's best friend: Animal-Assisted Intervention for older people with dementia

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Abstract

Dementia results in the loss of memory, intellect, rationality and social skills and is often accompanied by behavioural and psychological symptoms such as agitation, aggression, wandering and noisiness. Previous research has demonstrated that Animal-Assisted Interventions have some promise in increasing social behavior and reducing the behavioural and psychological symptoms in people with dementia. The current program of research further investigated Animal-Assisted Interventions for people with dementia.

The first study interviewed six elderly nursing home residents about their past experiences with pet ownership, having to give up their pet when they moved into care and also current experience with resident and/or visiting animals in the facility. The results indicated that the benefits of pet ownership included: love/attachment, companionship, unconditional love, caring, pleasure/joy and support. Losing/giving up a pet when the elderly person moved into care left most residents 'heart broken', however this grief was usually followed by acceptance of their loss. The benefits of visiting/resident animals in the care facility included: pleasure/joy, someone to talk to, physical benefits and love.

The second study implemented a six-week Animal-Assisted intervention program in a Residential Care Facility. Thirty residents participated in the program which consisted of volunteers visiting with accredited therapy dogs for one hour group sessions twice per week for the six week period. Observational behaviour measures of pro-social behaviour, disruptive behaviour, depression and memory-related problems were collected. Heart rate and blood pressure were also recorded. Measures were also collected during a four-week baseline

phase and a six-week follow-up phase. Residents' social behaviour (pro-social behaviour) was found to significantly increase during the intervention. Pro-social behaviour decreased during the follow-up phase however this was not significant. Residents' disruptive behaviour, memory problems and depressive behaviour were found to significantly decrease during the intervention.

The third study aimed to control for human-interaction effects by replicating the Animal-Assisted intervention without the dogs. A smaller group of seven residents, who also participated in the intervention study, took part in the control trial. Residents' social behaviour (pro-social behaviour) was found to be significantly higher for the intervention than the control condition. Residents' memory-related problems and depression scores were found to be significantly lower for the intervention than the control condition. There were no significant differences found for disruptive behaviour, diastolic blood pressure or heart rate for the intervention condition and the non-dog control condition.

The fourth study interviewed eleven people at the facility about their observations of the intervention sessions. Individuals interviewed included: facility staff, residents' family members and the volunteer dog handlers. Residents' comments at the sessions were also recorded. The interview participants observations of the effects on residents included: increased joy/pleasure, effects on memory, increased relaxation, improved focus, reduced agitation, reduced wandering, increased social behaviour and physical activity.

Results were discussed in relation to theory and previous research. Suggestions for future research include: further evaluation of group and individual Animal-Assisted programs and investigation of care facilities that allow resident animals.

Thesis Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Ann-Marie Wordley and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed……. Date……

Ann-Marie Wordley

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A wise person once told me that doing a PhD is a life-altering experience and for me, it quite literally was. I have learnt so much about myself, the value of patience, persistence and determination and to never, ever give up no matter what life throws in your path. I can now move into the next chapter of my life with a stronger sense of self belief and a renewed passion for enjoying life and doing a little bit of good in this world. Mother Teresa once said:

"We can not do great things in this world – only small things with great love"

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Dedication

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And to my family – my mum, dad, brother and my late great Auntie Laurie, who have supported me, inspired me and helped me to become the person I am today.

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"The world's gone mad,
And me and Mindy (the dog),
we just sit here"