



The benefits of animal assisted therapy to older adults suffering from dementia

Melanie Mitchell



Introduction

New Zealand has an ageing population, and as a result, an increasing number of people suffering from dementia. In 2011 there were 48,182 people affected by dementia, and the prevalence and incidence is only expected to grow (Ministry of Health, 2013). This rise will result in an increased demand for dementia care in residential aged care facilities. With dementia comes a varying degree, and array of behavioural and psychological symptoms such as aggression, confusion, agitation and impaired reasoning (Ministry of Health, 2015). These symptoms cannot only result in great distress and risk of harm to the residents, but can also impact negatively on carers and other residents of the rest home (Perkins, Bartlett, Travers & Rand, 2008). This is why the management of the symptoms of dementia is so essential.

Animal assisted therapy

Animal assisted therapy is relatively new, having begun in the 1950s by a man called Boris Levinson. It is defined as structured, and conducted with specifically certified animals one on one, or in small groups with therapeutic goals and outcomes (Filan, & Llewellyn-Jones, 2006).



Does animal assisted therapy minimise, or eliminate, the negative symptoms associated with dementia in residents of an aged care facility?

Evidence

A thorough literature review identified many benefits to using animal assisted therapy, evidenced by multiple studies. These studies varied in country, type and advancement of dementia, however all had similar results. These benefits included:

- Increased socialisation and activity
- A decrease in an agitation assessment scale
- Stimulates participation and cognitive function
- Decline in depression
- No side effects (Nordgren & Engstrom, 2013).

References

- Filan, S., & Llewellyn-Jones, RH. (2006). Animal-assisted therapy for dementia: A review of the literature. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 18(4), 597-611.
- Ministry of Health. (2013). *New Zealand Framework for Dementia Care*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/new-zealand-framework-for-dementia-care-nov13.pdf>
- Ministry of Health. (2015). *Dementia*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/mental-health/dementia>
- Nordgren, L., & Engstrom, G. (2014). Animal-assisted intervention in dementia: effects on quality of life. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 23(1), 7-19
- Perkins, J., Bartlett, H., Travers, C., & Rand, J. (2008). Dog-assisted therapy for older people with dementia: a review. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 27(4), 177-182. Doi: 10.1111/j.1741-6612.2008.00317.x

Recommendations

- Use animal assisted therapy to reduce behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia, staff burnout, and increase quality of life
- Introduce a resident dog to residential care facilities to reduce the behavioural symptoms during the sun down period (Nordgren and Engstrom, 2013).
- Use animal assisted therapy in combination with other treatment options (Filan, & Llewellyn-Jones, 2006).

Conclusion

With an ageing population and the number of people living with dementia on the rise, it is important to find a way to minimise the symptoms associated with this disease for the benefit of both the resident and the caregivers/nurses. The literature review showed that animal assisted therapy is a great way to help minimise the symptoms of dementia, although at this stage, should be used in combination with other treatment options (Nordgren and Engstrom, 2013).

PECOT category	Information relating to question	Explanation
Population	Older adults - 65 and over living with dementia in a residential aged care setting	Dementia is most common in older people and the risk of getting it increases with age. Those with dementia usually require care in an aged care setting (Alzheimer's New Zealand, 2012).
Exposure (intervention)	Older adults who have dementia and receive animal assisted therapy.	I will be looking for literature that looks at the effects animal assisted therapy has on the symptoms of dementia compared to other treatments or no treatments.
Comparison/Control	Older adults with dementia, receiving no treatment for their symptoms	This will be to compare the symptoms of dementia with a resident receiving animal assisted therapy and a resident receiving no treatment. This will help decide if a reduction of symptoms is due to the animal assisted therapy.
Outcome	Minimisation of symptoms of dementia, i.e no longer agitated, as observed by caregiver or family member.	I would like to know if using animal assisted therapy eliminates or minimises the symptoms of dementia for example will it stop a resident from being agitated.

Rationale

A poster was chosen as the means for distributing the evidence based literature review, as it is a more visual resource for getting this information out there. So many people in New Zealand are affected by dementia, either through family and friends, work or themselves (Ministry of health, 2015). By displaying it in a poster form it is likely to target a lot more of these people making them aware of the positive benefits that animal assisted therapy can have on people suffering from dementia. It is not only a way to minimise the effects of dementia in rest homes but also for those in the community, which is why, presenting a poster is beneficial.

Although there was evidence that animal assisted therapy helps minimise the symptoms of dementia, I believe more research would be needed before making a submission as most articles suggested using animal assisted therapy only in combination with other treatments (Nordgren & Engstrom, 2013).

Alzheimer's New Zealand. (2012). *Updated Dementia Economic Impact Report*. New Zealand: Deloitte Access Economics. Retrieved from http://www.alzheimers.org.nz/getmedia/557692aa-2ccd-4f38-8fdc-db440706fd05/Updated_Dementia_Economic_Impact_Report_2012_New_Zealand.pdf.aspx

Ministry of Health. (2015). *Dementia*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/mental-health/dementia>

Nordgren, L., & Engstrom, G. (2014). Animal-assisted intervention in dementia: effects on quality of life. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 23(1), 7-19