

Running head: THERAPY DOGS

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The utilization of therapy dogs in conjunction with conventional treatments improves patient outcomes in clinical and non-clinical settings. Conventional treatments include medications, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, social and psychological counseling. A therapy dog team consists of a dog and the owner who has successfully completed the Canine Good Citizen course. Before the dog and the owner can be considered for a therapy dog team, they must complete a series of rigorous evaluations by the organization where the team has been trained. There are a number of organizations of which a team can be a certified member. The common denominator all therapy dogs must possess is their friendliness, their ability to remain calm, and their willingness to follow commands.

Long before there were therapy dog teams, family pets were frequent visitors in long-term rehabilitation and care centers. Family pets would bring the comfort of a once familiar and comfortable setting to the patients. It was observed that the mood, facial expressions, and the tone of voice of the residents improved with the visits of the dogs. The residents of the facilities started to plan their days and appointments around when the therapy dogs would be visiting. Over time, the benefits of the pet's visits became more obvious and better understood. It was recognized that the pets added a very different and positive quality of life for the patients.

Most patients in long-term residential care facilities are those who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or senile dementia. In Australia, nine studies were identified and the research suggests that dog therapy is beneficial to people with dementia (Perkins, 2008). Improvement of the social behaviors of these patient's and the decrease in their agitation is significant when a therapy dog team interacts with

them. I have experienced firsthand the change in affect (mood) and the interaction of a somber and saddened woman with Alzheimer's disease. When we visit her, she becomes animated and moves her body and hands around more and will pet and give treats to the dog with a smiling face and a simple word, which is all she can say ~ yes. The dog will sit in front of her and put his paws on her lap, which brings giggles of joy to this usually quiet woman. With our subsequent visits, she reaches for the dog, to pet him and she becomes animated almost immediately. When we leave, her eyes almost beg us not to go. The behavior that this patient displays demonstrates the improved recognition of visitors (Perkins, 2008).

There is a gentleman who has senile dementia, Mr. F. He usually is sitting in a recliner chair. When visiting him, he calls out loudly for his deceased wife, Doris. This is part of the normal day for him. When he sees the dog, he starts calling out loudly, "wow, is that a big dog; what kind of dog is he? is he your dog? what is his name?" Perkins states that with the assistance of therapy dogs a patient with dementia can improve recall. This was tested with Mr. F by giving him a gentle prompt when he asked what kind of dog he was. Mr. F. was able to say that he was a Labrador retriever and he was also able to tell me that it was my dog. Mr. F. also gets out of his recliner chair and comes to where we are sitting, or outside for a walk with us. Most all of the visits with the patients result in a positive change of behavior and demeanor.

The research has cited that the benefits of contact with therapy dogs include tactile comfort, companionship and assisting people with social interaction (Perkins, 2008). Patients with dementia have a difficult time releasing emotion. At times they may also exhibit frantic and uncontrolled outbursts. Frequently a therapy dog can help

them to laugh or to cry as well as reduce their anxious outbursts (Wisdom, 2010). It is believed that the simple petting of the dog will lower anxiety as well as heart rate and blood pressure.

Liz Palika, the founder of the Foundation for Pet Provided Therapy, has been training and visiting with therapy dogs for more than 20 years. She reports similar stories of patients whom have never liked dogs, who will not speak to anyone and those who just need some tender loving care (TLC). When she arrives with the therapy dogs around these particular types of patients she will always receive a warm welcome and commentaries of, "I don't like dogs, but this one is different" and "You both had better come back to see me", which only helps in securing her conviction that the therapy dogs visits are invaluable to everyone. Her article, *Lifting Spirits, One Wag at a Time*, states the point very succinctly, that joy, comfort and laughter are brought to those people who need it the most. The reward of therapy dogs visits touch all involved.

Short term care facility residents are generally admitted after a prolonged illness or surgery. The use of therapy dogs in this environment is beneficial in conjunction with occupational and physical therapists. Patients who do not want to participate in their required therapy will come because the dogs are there (Jen, n.d.). The dog can be used as an instrument to improve or strengthen the fine motor skills of the patient. Hand eye coordination is also put to practice and generally improved upon. This can be achieved with grooming and petting the dog. Picking up dogs treats and giving them to the dogs can be a difficult task for some patients. With practice and therapy, they are able to reach their goals for therapy and the dogs appreciate the treats. Throwing a tennis ball or a Frisbee for the dog to retrieve provides excellent range of motion

exercises for the arms, shoulders and hands, again also improving on hand eye coordination. In the stronger and ambulatory patients, the dogs can be used for exercise by walking them on a leash and playing tug with a toy. There was a young patient who had a head injury and was not moving his limbs very well, when a therapy dog would jump on his bed and start to lick his hands, the boy would begin opening his hands and moving his fingers and then his arms (Jen, n.d.). Another boy who was depressed and refused therapy would be seen getting out of his wheel chair and walking to the dog treat jar to get treats for the dogs. The general well being of patients in long term and short term facilities is greatly enhanced and improved with each visit for a therapy dog team.

Another service where a therapy dog team provides benefits is witnessed in the classroom and the libraries. Children can read aloud to therapy dogs. “The benefits of this type of reading include greater comfort reading aloud, a sense of pride, and increase in self esteem, and in one pilot study, decrease absenteeism.” (Francis, 2009). Reports from parents and the children are favorable because they enjoy seeing the dogs and have fun at the same time. Francis observes that the children will come early for their reading with the therapy dog appointments in the Reading Education Assistance Dogs program (READ). The children will sit quietly and listen to the other children read their stories. The atmosphere is a no pressure, calm and relaxed one, with other library visitors looking on. The practice of reading out loud is in a setting which the children feel comfortable and can take risks, where they feel they are not being corrected or graded by the dogs, can surely increase their self confidence and carry over into their in school performance. (Francis, 2009). Furthermore, according to

Susan Black (2009), the READ program “improved their overall reading scores and increased their reading rate by an average of 24 words per minute”.

Therapy dogs can be seen in a variety of different locations and situations. They can be attending a college, providing help to alleviate stress in college students during their finals week. Jamie Oppenheim (2010), has interviewed students that have already visited with the dogs and they noticed a marked relaxation and decrease in their anxiety. The students wish that it was available all the time as a way to help them unwind and de-stress. The program was started by the assistant health services director because he believes that it impacts the students well being. The students have also reported that it would be nice to be able to have the therapy dogs visit more often as it gives them a feeling of being at home and not so lonely.

After the devastation that happened September 11, 2001, the terrorists attack on the World Trade Center., numerous therapy dog team were brought out to assist in the processing of the grief. Many people that had their lives ruined on that day. They share their devastation, the ensuing depression, and the inability to talk about it until they see and feel the therapy dogs. In an interview by Melissa Block on *NPR* (Robert, n.d), the people would voice how the dogs allowed them to have a release of emotion, whether it was tears, laughter or just a warm touch and a lick of the hand. The professional therapists along with the owners of the therapy dogs noted the stress of the situation and the effects that it has on them personally and the dogs make it easier on them. Therapy dogs absorb the stress and frustration of the mourners and will also manifest the stress in certain ways such as fatigue. Again, this demonstrates how having a therapy dog in stressful situations will always bring good results.

The military is also beginning to use therapy dogs that are specially selected and trained to be part of the medical team for the 85<sup>th</sup> Medical detachment combat-stress control unit (Sharon, n.d.). This is the first time that they will be sent to Iraq. The dogs are part of the America's VetDogs. They are being sent after the Army queried whether "the psychological benefits that the therapy dogs provide stateside troops could be replicated in Iraq". (Sharon, n.d.). They believe that the troops will also benefit from playing with the dogs and releasing stress by the throwing of a ball or frisbee. The benefits that are witnessed in rehabilitation centers, comfort and release of emotions can also be of benefit to the troops in a combat zone. The trainer of these specialized dogs notes that they offer affection without regard to gender, race, disability or injury. In many settings, troubled soldiers have come to regard the animal as a safe haven of communication and have opened up in ways they never have been able to with humans. Therapy dogs in this setting are trained to plug into humans and to be completely non-judgmental and that often prompts people to expose their vulnerabilities, uncap emotions and move past their difficulties (Sharon, n.d.).

"Man's best friend brings calming influence to the negotiation table" is the title of an article that is intriguing. It is about Annie, she walks into a room filled with arguing attorneys and the atmosphere in the room is immediately calmed (Heather, n.d.). Annie is a dog, a 13 year old Australian shepherd and she is employed by a law firm, of which her owner is the president. He had brought her to work one day as a chance casual visit. The clients ended up loving her. More surprisingly though, her owner noticed that she would find the most argumentative person in the room and Annie would go to that person. What would happen amazed everyone as the tension in the room would settle

down and the argumentative person's demeanor would become more sociable. This allowed for the attorneys and mediators to be more productive and settle the case. Her owner comments that Annie always provides a steady, relaxing influence.

From a hospital room to a combat field in Iraq, therapy dogs have been utilized for many purposes. They have been seen in nursing homes; outpatient therapy clinics, doctor's offices, colleges, classrooms, libraries, churches and their purpose is the same, to touch the human spirit in any way that can happen. People start socializing, interacting and communicating when the therapy dogs are around. Children will read and gain self esteem, tension and conflict quite possibly will be resolved with the help of therapy dogs. Clearly the benefits of therapy dogs visits cannot be overstated. It is an adjunct to our lives and to the conventional treatment of those who are ill. Therapy dogs are really angels in fur as well as man's best friend.

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