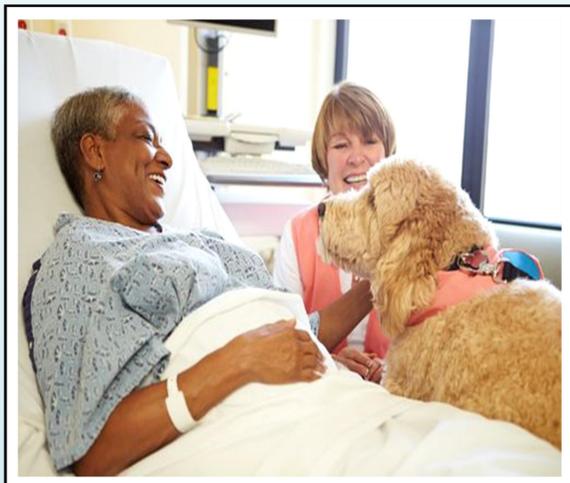


Animal-Assisted Therapy for Traumatic Brain Injury

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Background & Significance

The aim of this research is to determine the therapeutic potential of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) in improving psychosocial and cognitive outcomes of adult neurotrauma patients suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI). Symptoms such as anxiety, depression, decreased motivation, emotional lability, irritability, and isolation are associated with poor health outcomes for brain-injured patients. These symptoms are primarily addressed through neurological assessments, frequent monitoring, pharmacological agents, physical medicine, occupational therapy, social support, psychology, psychiatry, and physical restraints when necessary. AAT can be utilized as an adjunct therapy to treat this vulnerable population in a more holistic yet effective manner. Animals have been known to alert humans before the onset of medical crises such as seizure activity and changes in glycemic index levels. Animal-human interactions can improve psychosocial and cognitive outcomes and enhance quality of life.

Practice Implications and CNL Role

Implications for Nursing Practice:

- 🐾 Ensure consent has been obtained
- 🐾 Verify that there are no allergies to pets or pet dander
- 🐾 Implement protocols for infection control and disease prevention

CNL role:

- 🐾 Promote safe implementation based on evidence-based practice
- 🐾 Lateral integration of care among the nursing staff, physicians, physical therapists, occupational therapists, patients, pets, and handlers.
- 🐾 Ensuring that all safety precautions are in place for the patient and the animal

Methods

In exploring the treatments and outcomes of adult neurotrauma patients with traumatic brain injury, the following PICO question was developed and researched:

Among adult patients with traumatic brain injury would implementation of animal-assisted therapy versus the standard level of nursing care without animal-assisted therapy be more effective at improving psychosocial and cognitive outcomes?

Databases utilized in this search included PubMed, CINAHL, and OneSearch with PubMed being primary. Search terms included animal-assisted therapy, AAT, pet-assisted therapy, canine-assisted therapy, traumatic brain injury, TBI, and treatment for psychosocial symptoms. The search was refined to include peer reviewed articles written in English and published between 2015 and 2022. Five articles providing clear evidence about the effects of animal-assisted therapy were selected.

Evidence Summary

The available data emphasizes the benefits of animal-assisted therapy as a promising adjunct to traditional neurorehabilitation. Overall, the results of the research studies reviewed support the inclusion of animal-assisted therapy as a component of a holistic and comprehensive treatment plan for survivors of traumatic brain injury.

Conclusion

The definitive benefits of AAT include:

- 🐾 Increases happy hormones such as oxytocin & serotonin
- 🐾 Inhibits the production of the stress hormone cortisol
- 🐾 Reduces feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety
- 🐾 Lowers blood pressure and heart rate
- 🐾 Encourages physical activity & socialization
- 🐾 Improves ability to complete Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)
- 🐾 Improves quality of life

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