

The Impact of Animal Assisted Therapy on Staff
in a Seniors Residential Care Facility

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INTRODUCTION

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is gaining a stronger presence within the therapeutic community. It is now utilized to ameliorate a diverse range of human needs across the lifespan in a variety of settings including developmental disabilities; visual, hearing and mobility impairments; acquired brain injuries; chronic illnesses; palliative care; trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction (Chandler, 2005; Engelman, 2013; Hanrahan, 2013; Kamioka, Okada, Tsutani, Park, Okuizumi, et al, 2013; O'Haire, 2013). There has been particular interest in working with seniors, especially those with dementia (Bernabei, De Ronchi, La Ferla, Moretti, Tonelli, et al, 2013; Filan, & Llewellyn-Jones, 2006; Majić, Gutzmann, Heinz, Lang, & Rapp,

2013; Nordgren, & Engström, 2014; Richeson, 2003; Sellers, 2006). However, the presence of therapy animals may not only be beneficial for clients but also has the potential to impact the entire system and thus could also be a contributor employee workplace wellness.

A holistic conceptualization of wellness constitutes five interrelated and interdependent areas physical, psychological/emotional, spiritual, intellectual/vocational, and social health. The impact of stress on families with a member having dementia (Gitlin, Marx, Stanley, & Hodgson, 2015; Kim, Chang, Rose, & Kim, 2012) as well as worker wellness has well been documented (Csiernik, 2014). Neuropsychiatric symptoms are common in nursing home residents (Selbæk, Engedal, & Bergh, 2013) as are behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD) that include aggression, wandering, restlessness, repeated actions, suspicion, apathy, sundowning and sexualized behaviours (Alzheimer Society Canada, 2016). In 2014 the Ontario (Canada) Long Term Care Association OLTC reported that 62% of Ontario nursing home residents lived with Alzheimer's or another dementias while nearly one third had severe cognitive impairment. Since 2008 the proportion of residents with dementia increased by 6% while mild or moderate cognitive impairment rose by 8% with dual diagnosis of dementia coupled with a psychiatric diagnosis increasing 11%. As well, one in three residents also had a psychiatric diagnosis such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. This contributed to a 14% increase in moderately aggressive behaviour with nearly half of residents exhibiting some level of aggressive behaviour between 2010 and 2012. As the complexity of residents issues has increased so have incidents of aggressive behaviour involving employees which has led to concerns regarding the safety of both staff and residents. This trend is only likely to continue in Canada as the proportion of seniors over 65 is predicted to grow from 15.9% in 2016 to 22.6% by 2041; 9.7 million people in total (University of Ottawa, 2016).

Caring for individuals who have dementia is both emotionally and physically taxing and prolonged family and workplace stress can impact the quality of care provided to residents (Pitfield, Shahriyarmolki, & Livingston, 2011). Long-term care nursing staff are subject to considerable occupational stress and report high levels of burnout (Woodhead, Northrop, & Edelstein, 2016). Both verbal and physical assaults on staff are common often occurring in patients' rooms because of an individual's cognitive impairment and/or not wanting personal care. Documented physical contact against staff includes slapping, squeezing, punching, hitting, and shoving (Lachs, Rosen, Teresi, Eimicke, Ramirez, M., et al, 2013; Morgan, Cammer, Stewart, Crossley, D'Arcy, et al, 2012; Tak, Sweeney, Alterman, Baron, & Calvert, 2010). Resident aggression in seniors care facilities is associated with increased levels of workplace stress as well as with compassion fatigue and burnout (Brodaty, Draper, & Low, 2003; Edberg, Bird, Richards, Woods, Keeley, & Davis-Quarrell, 2008). Not surprisingly one outcome is employee turnover, which is a substantive and expensive concern in seniors' residential care facilities (Kash, Naufal, Cortés, & Johnson, 2010; McGilton, Boscart, Brown, & Bowers, 2014). There is a distinct relationship between working conditions, mental health, and intention to leave with intention to leave partially mediated by employee mental health. It is argued that workplace programs must begin to address work organization features to reduce employee intention to leave (Zhang, Punnett, Gore, & CPH-NEW Research Team, 2014).

Human-animal interactions involve sensory, tactile and social engagement that stimulates the release of oxytocin. Oxytocin has widespread neurological, biological, emotional and social effects, including attachment, trust and social processing, while also decreasing anxiety, stress and aggression (Netherton & Schatte, 2011; Olmert, 2009). By stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, oxytocin calms the fight-flight-freeze stress response, reducing the secretion of

cortisol, aldosterone and adrenaline, while also increasing pain tolerance, lowering blood pressure, increasing vagal tone, decreasing inflammation, improving wound healing, facilitating learning, and lowering anxiety (Chandler, 2012). This is a major reason there has been an increase in the interest in examining AAT as a therapeutic mechanism particularly in seniors' care facilities where the interaction has been demonstrated to ameliorate the symptoms and impact of dementia. If this is the case, is there also a spill over effect such that AAT's effects on residents produces a more well workplace?

METHODOLOGY

A specialized dementia wing of a long term care home in an urban Southwestern, Ontario city was selected for this exploratory study. The residential facility is home to 160 individuals, many of whom have a formal diagnosis of dementia and who are in the middle to late stages of this condition.

The AAT study was undertaken on a specialized dementia unit within the facility, Memory Lane. Baseline data on the residents was collected for two weeks followed by eight weeks of animal assisted therapy and then a three-week post-intervention data collection period. Residents engaged in three one hour sessions each week during the study period with a range of farm animals including a sheep, rabbits, chickens and a goat. Activities consisted of petting, grooming and walking the animals; singing animal songs, learning about the animal's history, species and breed; training the animal; reminiscing about past human-animal interactions and relationships; and reflecting on the animal's behaviours and story in relation to their own story. Fifteen residents participated in the study itself.

Twenty (90.9%) of 22 staff who work on the specialized dementia unit where the Animal Assisted Therapy program was implemented agreed to be interviewed using an eight item open ended data collection instrument (Appendix A) at the conclusion of the trial period to ascertain the impact they have perceived of the program. The sample consisted of personal service workers, registered nurses, dietary aids, housekeepers and recreation therapists. The sample consisted of 18 women and 2 men ranging in age range from early 20s to mid 50s. All interviews were conducted at the worksite either during working hours or directly before or after depending upon each participant's availability. Interviews were tape recorded with the tapes transcribed verbatim with a thematic analysis of the responses conducted. Ethics approval was granted by the King's University College Research Ethics Review Committee.

RESULTS

In examining the transcripts distinct inconsistencies became evident. While the majority of respondents found that the animals had a positive impact on the affect and behaviour of residents, indirectly also creating a more positive work environment, there were a minority of responses indicating that there were no noticeable changes. This led to a re-examination of the transcripts where a key factor was found leading to the differences: the shift the respondent worked. This readily explained the two distinct sets of responses while also leading to programming, financial and ethical questions.

Day shift staff perceived the farm AAT program to have a variety of positive benefits and residual outcomes for residents and for themselves. This was often expressed via lengthy, detailed and overtly positive comments that were overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining the

program. Adjectives such as effective, interactive, engaging, and positive were regularly used as well as descriptions of specific outcomes, such as reduced agitation, greater communication and less wondering on program days.

I think this whole project was effective. (Residents) were quite engaged, even the ones who are quiet, the residents who are not verbal, you know, (were) interactive. I think this is something I would highly recommend, especially for the residents with dementia, it was a form of communicating and engaging, you know, being able to touch and pet the animal, I found that was quite effective. (Interview 1)

anybody that came in contact with the animals at the time were very happy. I didn't see or hear any negativity at all. (Interview 12)

I was shocked about some of the residents that wander and pace up and down the halls, sometimes like for an hour straight, could actually sit and enjoy and just be involved in that. In this program I found that they would sit for the whole thing, which I thought was great. (Interview 11)

Seeing them happy is nice. (Interview 19)

However, afternoon and night shift staff had a less positive view of the program with some not even knowing when the program was implemented and why. This group typically indicated that the program had no lasting impact on the residents, and thus none of themselves either:

Interview 15: It had absolutely no effect

Interview 16: (no changes) to do with the animal therapy

Interview 17 I don't know, because I - I never work days

Interview 18: No I did not see any, any difference.

In contrast staff who worked days provided several clear examples of how the AAT initiative not only benefitted residents but also enhanced the workplace environment and staff morale on days the animals were on site.

Oh yeah, definitely. Everybody that I noticed was so much more pleasant, you know, smiling when the animals arrived. They were just, they're so cute. [laughs]" (Interview 12)

(I was) Able to engage the residents easier. (Interview 14)

It did make our jobs easier on the floor. (Interview 11)

Respondents also described curiosity about the animals among staff who were not directly involved. Memory Lane staff noticed workers from other units and programs stopping by to see the animals and to watch the residents enjoy their time interacting with them. Some respondents also described positive, spontaneous communication occurring within and/or between groups of staff in different settings regarding the farm AAT program.

Staff throughout the whole building were like "oh my goodness the animals are here" and they come poke their head in and every single staff member that came in here had a smile on their face when they saw the animals, whether it was the diaper on the goat or the diaper on the chickens or just anything. They always just wanted to come in and pet the goat, just take time out of their own day to come in and see how things were going. (Interview 19)

...we had staff coming down all the time and when the word got out...people were asking us about it too and we were just explaining that it was you know the pet therapy and what there was and stuff. And the staff would come down and specifically go out to see the animals, not all the staff, but some of the staff, it was interesting to them too

(Interview 20)

However, there remained tensions as other staff not directly involved with the program stated that it was not useful or a waste of time.

... to me the negativity is sometimes so overwhelming that it's disheartening. So, I just said to them when I would hear oh that's ridiculous, why are the bringing animals in, blah, blah, blah. There was negativity from a lot of the staff. (Interview 14)

The AAT initiative was reported to have a positive impact on workload for day staff; one compared their experience working in the day program to Memory Lane, which typically had larger groups and less staff. The AAT program provided more structure that seemed to help enable relief for staff to focus more on providing quality programming for all their residents.

I found having that group of nine or 10 people throughout the morning gave me opportunity to work with, you know, the other group more intimately and more therapeutic all for people that perhaps don't get, you know, aren't as demanding of engagement and of my time, they were able to benefit from, you know, sensory programs from me and they just got a lot more of my time. And I think overall the whole unit was a little more at ease because you need that kind of small dividing group, different areas, different environment. So, overall I found the unit calmer. (Interview 8)

One respondent discussed the AAT program almost as a strategic distraction for residents that inadvertently reduced the number of residents they had to watch at one time. Another described the program as a redirection tactic used variably depending on the resident they were supporting.

I know they're safe when they're outside with the animals or in here with the animals.

You know, if there's four or six people of them at a time then there's four or six people that I'm not looking out for out there on the floor. (Interview 10)

There were multiple exemplars throughout the interviews highlighting positive impacts on the work environment. Likewise, there was appreciation for what AAT did for residents and how AAT impacted their connection to the residents and work, even if the change was mainly experienced in the moment. This interconnection between resident and staff wellness is certainly worthy of further exploration.

I think the staff people enjoyed it. It's something to talk about, like a conversation that we've had ourselves about a goat in a diaper, so, in that way, yes. I think people think it was a neat idea. I think we always love to see an opportunity for our residents to enjoy something very special. And having visiting animals is very special I would think for them. And so that would be the impact on staff that we love to see in enrichment in our resident's lives. (Interview 2)

The staff again was very engaged, they really enjoyed it and it was good for both the staff and the resident to have something totally different from a regular line of duty to do. And it really did have staff just smiling and just feeling good overall, knowing the resident, that it's making a difference in the resident at that time... and I will keep repeating it that it was a good thing for the home, for the residents for the staff. I seen the

residents are more uplifting, smiling, it was very effective, especially with the residents who are more withdrawn. They were light, they were lit up. (Interview 1)

Others spoke directly about the impacts on how they viewed their normal day in comparison to their time in the farm AAT program. One staff made a direct link between staff wellness and how the program could inadvertently be utilized for staff.

So I think that something like that as beneficial as this is could be right through the whole building. And even for you know like even for like staff too. Somebody who is a little edgy that day - why didn't you go see the animals or if there's ... I mean everybody's got lousy days, it's not just residents that have behaviours, I mean we leave our garbage at the door, but if somebody's got a stressful situation at home, why don't you ... You know send them down to see the chickens for five minutes or something or you know go pet the bunny rabbit. I really believe in pet therapy period for everybody, not just for residents and I just find it very beneficial. (Interview 20)

Overall most of the respondents valued the program and stated that it contributed to a positive feeling within the unit and around the building. Staff members in general reported that the program was beneficial and supported a continuation of the program. Repeatedly study participants noted that there was a decrease in agitation and aggressiveness among residents on AAT program days. They also reported that it was nice to see these residents happy even though they note that there was not a long term impact on behaviours. Most staff members felt that it would have more of a lasting impact if this was a regular part of the program. However, despite the positive benefits enjoyed in general by staff involved in the initiative, respondents from all shifts reported no direct effect on their job, nor did it make their shift any more enjoyable, easier nor more difficult; it simply had no impact.

DISCUSSION

Seeing a baby goat in a diaper brings a smile just about anyone's face; including those with cognitive impairments. Animal Assisted Therapy is gaining momentum in a variety of caregiving fields where workplace stress is a constant. There is extensive documentation of secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue among helping professionals (Bride, Robinson, Yegidis, & Figley, 2004; Buchanan, Anderson, Uhlemann, & Horwitz; Figley 1995, 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Stewart, 2012) as well as vicarious trauma (Dill, 2007; Devilly et al., 2009; Najjar, et al., 2009) and burnout (Acker, 2011; Halbesleben & Buckley 2004; Harr & Moore, 2011; Horowitz, 2006; Maslach, 2001; Newell & MacNeil, 2011). These conditions lead to substantive human and financial costs and thus an initiative that can benefit clients as well as staff appears to be one whose implementation and funding should not be questioned. However, few counselling interventions are straight forward especially in the fields of aging and dementia.

What became evident in examining the data was the dichotomy between staff working different shifts. Day staff were overwhelming in favour of the program, viewing substantive improvements in their clients' functioning and behaviour and as an indirect result having positive effect on the workplace environment. However, this was not unanimous. As well, afternoon and night shift staff did not have the benefit of the animals in their work environment nor did they see any protracted change in the behaviour of residents on Memory Lane for the very reason they were living there; the inability to retain new memories.

Animal Assisted Therapy has additional costs and liabilities because you are working with living creatures. There are also risks to the animals because of unintended mishandling by residents due to their diminished cognitive capacities. As well, the animals are not there for staff

to engage with and their presence can actually be disruptive to routines which are essential in a care facility housing vulnerable individuals.

At the heart of this debate, initiated by animals, is an even more fundamental question. How do we treat each other especially as we age and become more fragile? One reason AAT is successful among this population is that every time the animals were introduced to the environment, which was three times a week for eight weeks, it was if they were there for the first time for the residents. Residents retained no memory of previous animal engagement which made each encounter in essence a first encounter. It was this fact that contributed to the ongoing positive reactions but also the lack of any sustained gains even into the very next shift just a few hours after the animals departed the facility. So given, there is no memory of the event and the impact while positive is fleeting, the question must be asked is it worth the financial cost and associated risks to the animals? This question has been answered in part by this follow-up study.

The impact of AAT was not only on the residents but also on employees and the entire work environment. Though not sustained, day staff found residents to be temporarily calmer. They found residents temporarily more engaged. They reported a more positive working atmosphere in this high stress environment. But what of the night staff? Simply, in the pilot study there was no thought bringing the animals in at different times. Instead a regular routine was deemed of importance. It would then be a simple solution to alternate programming in the morning, afternoon and evening in order to benefit not only residents but all staff. Also, by doing programming in the evenings it would provide some families the opportunity to also participate with their aging relatives in a more positive and active manner.

This was an exploratory qualitative study conducted in one residential environment and subject to all the limits of any qualitative study. However, the outcomes indicate that there is certainly a future for Animal Assisted Therapy in seniors' care residents even with the most vulnerable clients and that the benefit is not exclusive to the clients.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me your role? How long worked here?

What type of interaction did you have with the Farm Animal Assisted Therapy program?

2. What is your overall impression of the program?

Probe:

What were your thoughts of having animals on the unit?

Did it make your job easier in any way?

Did it make your job more difficult in any way?

Did it make your job more enjoyable?

3. What was the impact on residents?

Probe:

Did it led to different behaviours?

Did it affect their interpersonal relationships other residents did it decrease, agitation, aggressive or acting out behaviour ?

What type of impact did it have in the home area?

4. What impact did it have on families?

Probe:

Did it make communication or interpersonal relationships better?

5. What impact did you have on the workplace?

Probe:

Did you see any differences between program days (Mon/Wed/Friday) and non-program days?

Did you witness any changes in behavior of your co-workers arising from the AAT program?

What impact did it have on the overall mood and morale in Memory Lane?

6. Any suggestions for improvement?

7. Do you think the program should be continued?

Probe:

Why / Why not?

8. Anything else you would like to add that we haven't talked about?

Thank you for your time.