

A Pilot Study Based on Online Survey Research Assessing the COVID-19 Impact on the Wellbeing of 15 Dogs Involved in Flemish Animal-Assisted Intervention Projects

Authors : L. Meers, L. Contalbrigo, V. Stevens, O. Ulitina, S. Laufer, W. E. Samuels, S. Normando

Abstract : Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, there has been concern that domestic animals may help spread SARS-Cov-2. This concern also greatly affected human-animal interaction projects such as animal-assisted interventions (AAI). As a result, institutions and AAI practitioners developed new safety protocols and procedures to control the spread of the SARS-Cov-2 virus during AAI sessions and to guarantee safety for their clients and animals. However, little is known yet about the impact on animals' needs and the possible welfare issues due to these lifestyle adaptations. Fifteen therapists in Flanders, Belgium, who were currently conducting canine-assisted interventions, conducted unstructured observations on how their dogs' (11 mixed breeds, 3 Labradors, 1 terrier aged 2 - 12 years) behaviors changed due to institutional COVID-19 safety protocols. Most (80%) of the respondents reported that their dogs showed sniffing or sneezing after smelling disinfected areas. Two (13%) dogs responded with vomiting and gagging, and three (20%) dogs urinated over disinfected areas. All protocols advise social distancing between participants and animals. When held back, eight (53%) dogs showed self-calming behaviors. Respondents reported that most (73%) dogs responded with flight reactions when seeing humans wearing facial masks. When practitioners threw their used masks in open dustbins, five (33%) dogs tried to take them out with their mouths and play with them; two (13%) Labradors tried to eat them. Taking the dogs' temperatures was the most frequently (53%) used method to supervise their health. However, all dogs showed behaviors as ducking the tail, trying to escape, or biting the animal handler during this procedure. We interpret these results to suggest that dogs tended to react with stress and confusion to the changes in AAI practices they're part of. The health and safety protocols that institutions used were largely borne from recommendations made to protect humans. The participating practitioners appeared to use their knowledge of dog behavior and safety to modify them as best they could—but with more significant concern directed towards the other humans. Given their inter-relatedness and mutual importance for welfare, we advocate for integrated human and animal health and welfare assessments and protocols to provide a framework for "One health" approaches in animal-assisted interventions.

Keywords : animal-assisted therapy, COVID-19 protocol, one health, welfare

Conference Title : ICA 2021 : International Conference on Anthrozoology

Conference Location : Copenhagen, Denmark

Conference Dates : June 10-11, 2021