

A Pilot Study Exploring Dog Owners' Perceptions on Volunteering With Their Dogs in Animal-Assisted Therapy Program in Singapore

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Abstract : In Singapore, a few hospitals and non-governmental social service agencies have been utilising animal-assisted therapy (AAT) in their practice in recent years, although the animals used (e.g., dogs, cats, and horses) and program modality may differ due to the different practice settings, client profiles, and intervention goals. This pilot study explores dog owners' perceptions of AAT with a focus on examining the enablers and barriers towards volunteering with their dogs in AAT programs in Singapore. A qualitative, thematic analysis study was conducted using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 dog owners. 3 of the dog owners had previous experience volunteering with their dogs serving elderly patients in a community hospital, while the rest of the dog owners had no previous experience volunteering with their dogs. The former group was recruited with the help of the hospital, while the latter group was recruited via word-of-mouth. Dog owners who had volunteering experiences in AAT program versus those who had none differed in their perceptions towards AAT. Dog owners who had volunteered with their dogs in an AAT program in a hospital felt that their volunteering experience were meaningful to patients and to themselves, as they were intrinsically motivated by the desire to serve the community. Those who had not volunteered were hesitant to volunteer with their dogs as they were not comfortable with strangers touching their dogs. They also felt that it would be a huge commitment in terms of time and money; most of them do not own a car as it is uneconomical, and pets are not allowed on Singapore's public transport systems. This study is limited by its small sample size, and its findings are not generalisable. However, given that volunteers are an invaluable resource in healthcare settings, future studies can examine more stakeholders' perceptions towards AAT.

Keywords : animal-assisted therapy, dog-assisted therapy, volunteers, complementary therapy

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