

The Presence of Dogs in Nursing Homes: Experiences Concerning the Mental Health of Residents

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Abstract : Introduction: Dementia and depression are common mental disorders of nursing home residents. The care of these residents consists of providing both physical, social and mental care. Too often, the physical needs are given priority, and municipal health services are urged to focus more on the patients mental and social needs. The presence of dogs may have positive impact on the mental health of nursing home residents by improving mood, social interaction and enjoyment of the visits. The voluntary organization Red Cross, has given priority to this subject by training and certifying dogs and owners (equipages), committed for regular visits at local nursing homes. Focus of this study: How do the dog owners and employees experience the presence of a dog equipage concerning the mental health of nursing home residents? Method: Individual interviews with 8-10 certified dog owners who are volunteers from Red Cross, contributing with regular visits at local nursing homes. Focus group interviews with 10 employees working in two different nursing homes. Preliminary results: Five to seven residents and one or two employees attended weekly dog equipage visits during a period of six months. The presence of an equipage seems to have made the residents calm and more social orientated with a lighter mood and better verbal expression. Some of the residents with dementia remembered the name of the dog from one week to another. The informants also reported positive outcome for the residents by their opportunity to give and get close through physical contact with a dog. Further, the presence of an equipage affected the atmosphere at the nursing home positively by promoting joy and initiating conversations about dogs. A conscious approach by the dog owners towards the residents seems to be of significance to this matter. The positive attitude and support from employees also seem to be of crucial importance for the maintenance of these visits. Conclusion: The presence of trained dog equipages in nursing homes seems to have had an overall positive impact on the mental health of residents. A conscious approach from the dog owners as well as positive support from employees seems to have a crucial impact on the success and maintenance of the visits. These findings correspond well to former research and can thereby give implications for more extended use of dogs as a mental health promoting initiative towards geriatric consumers of municipal health care services. Further research through larger studies is needed.

Keywords : animal assisted intervention, geriatric mental health, nursing home, resident

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