

Animal Assisted Interventions and Animal Welfare Considerations

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Abstract

Animals, and especially dogs, play a real role as social companions, but they are also helpful in promoting human health by taking part to Animal Assisted Interventions. We will find lots of testimonies of what dogs may change in our life [1]. But what about Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) from the therapy dogs' point of view? There is a consensus about security in hospitals and lots of protocols are aim to reduce risks for Humans. Let's consider the animal's place in AAI.

Keywords: *Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI); Animal Welfare*

Introduction

30,000 years ago, Humans started to domesticate dogs [2] and it was the beginning of long cooperation. Each specie influencing the other one: dogs were selected for their abilities to socialize with us, which changed their behavior and cognition [3]. Domesticated dogs helped us for protection, hunting or herding, and a very special bond was created and is still very strong nowadays. For example, dogs may assist disabled persons and become their eyes or arms and legs. But dogs are not only "used" as compensators of our health issues, they are also partners and they bring us comfort and real attachment. Then Animal Assisted Interventions appeared and dogs found a new role by our sides: being a link between a professional and his patients, to facilitate communication and care [4]. The animal is positively perceived because he has a non-judgemental position in the therapeutic relation: a dog will not pay attention to your appearance or the way you speak, for example. He is considered as a neutral being, welcoming and accepting the patient just as he or she is.

Animal assisted interventions benefits: Lots of articles [5] will explain the benefits of AAI, but this is not the point of this contribution. This field is getting more and more recognized and the IAHAIO published recommendations and extended guidelines [6]. First of all, professionals have to guarantee safe interventions for their patients. Animal welfare is also a consideration and it is clearly mentioned that AAI cannot be uncomfortable for the animals [7].

Work frame: A necessity. Working with therapy dogs [8] since 2009, I always wanted my four paws colleagues to feel truly at ease at work. Psychologist in a psychiatric facility for the elderly, I had to be careful since the beginning to my dogs' wellbeing. That is why I set a work frame:

- I have certifications in AAT and was especially trained to "read" my dogs' reaction while they work;
- my dogs got accustomed progressively to their work place and all its specificities (sounds, smells, elevators, floors, stairs, lights, etc.) [9];
- there is daily planning and the interventions are scheduled to manage some rests;

- my office has been configured so that a kennel could be installed, and my dogs are free to get in or out during the therapeutic interviews;
- when group activities are organized, there is also a place where the dogs can go if they don't want to participate anymore;
- patients can give them treats, but I provide them [10] so that my dogs stay healthy and do not eat dangerous food;
- Each time I suppose that the situation is not satisfying for my dogs, I stop the interaction and I explain why to my patients.

Conclusion

As a handler, my dogs trust me and it is my responsibility to protect them from unpleasant working conditions. That is why my first therapy dog, Darkom, got retired as soon as I have noticed some tiredness signs. He trained Jingle, his young colleague. My modest experience is just an example and I am convinced that many professionals already have that concern about their therapy animal's welfare. AAI is an exciting way to enrich our practice, but that should not make us forget that we are with sentient beings who are our partners.

Darkom



Jingle



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