

# Pet therapy in alzheimers disease essay sample

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



The scope of this review shall be limited to pet therapy as a form of therapy for Alzheimer's disease. Pet therapy or animal assisted therapy has been recommended for the treatment of dementia which is one of hallmark symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. It entails bringing animals and humans together aimed at manipulating the social environment of the patient therefore triggering behavioural changes. This review shall review five articles on the subject of pet therapy focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used to conduct the study and possible improvements that could be made based on the findings of each study.

## **Review**

In one study, the effect of animal assisted therapy on patients suffering from dementia who were exhibiting passive behaviour was studied at a nursing home. The specific goal of the study was to determine if there are specific health benefits that might be accrued by patients with dementia who exhibit passive behaviour. Passive behaviour in patients with dementia is characterized by negative social behaviours such as isolation, further impairment of the cognitive and memory functions and a loss in quality of life led by the patient. The study entailed videotaping daily sessions of patients with dementia with and without a pet. There were eight subjects chosen for the study who underwent 32 sessions of therapy with and without a pet. The sessions were videotaped and later analyzed to determine the changes in the passive behaviours of the patients.

The analysis revealed that 7 out of the 8 subjects showed remarkable improvements in relation to passive behaviour as a result of pet therapy. It must however be noted that the number of subjects in the study was greatly

limited and the study was conducted in a nursing home therefore the generalization of the findings might be premature. This is because it might not be possible to determine if the therapy would work if applied in a different set up such as at the patients' home. In future, the effect of pet therapy ought to be studied in a natural set up such as the patients' home using a bigger sample in order to determine the applicability of pet therapy for treatment of patients with dementia.

### **According to the National Institute for Neurological and Communicative**

Disorders and Stroke/Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, weight loss is one of the notable symptoms seen in patients with Alzheimer's disease. Researchers have hypothesized that the weight loss could be as a result of increase expenditure of energy due to repetitive activities such as pacing, agitation and wandering. It is against this background that a study was conducted in order to determine the efficacy of animal assisted therapy on the nutritional intake of patients with Alzheimer's disease. The study involved collection of nutritional data from 62 patients with Alzheimer's disease who were housed in special units. The nutritional data was taken for two weeks after which they were introduced to sessions involving mediation on fish in an aquarium. The nutritional data was collected on a daily basis for the next two weeks then on a weekly basis for six weeks.

The weight of the subjects was taken for three months prior to the commencement of the study and for 4 months after the commencement of the therapy involving fish in an aquarium. It was observed that the patients ate more after the introduction of contemplation on the fish in the aquarium

as compared to earlier on. It also observed that Alzheimer's patients who used to pace around were calmer and sat down for longer periods hence they could eat more. As a result, patients who participated in the study gained weight and required a decreased amount of nutritional supplements. The study provides quantitative data regarding the effect of pet therapy on the nutritional intake of patients with Alzheimer's disease. The weakness of the study was that it only entailed collection of data on the nutritional intake and not the quality of nutrition. It would therefore be advisable to monitor the quality of the nutrition among patients with Alzheimer's disease.

In order to determine the effect of animal assisted therapy on the communication skills of a demented Alzheimer's patient, a study was conducted which involved the use of a pet and a stuffed animal. The study subject was an 86 year old woman who had dementia as a result of Alzheimer's disease. A stuffed and a live animal were put in the environment of the subject at different times. The conversational output of the woman was recorded and grouped into information units that were either regarded as complete, incomplete or non-information units. The study comprised of the following phases: the baseline phase entailed carrying out 3 sessions in which the responses of the client were recorded. The live animal and the stuffed animal phase involved recording the responses of the patient in the presence of a live animal and stuffed animal respectively. There were withdrawal phases from both the live and the stuffed animal during which the responses were recorded.

After the analysis of the data, it was evident that introduction of a live or stuffed animal resulted in an enhancement of the communication output of

the demented Alzheimer's subject. This was especially notable during the session involving the live animal where the patient produced more complete information units. This may be due to the fact the presence of the live animal invoked memories from the early life of the patient. The study had several strengths: it qualitatively analysed the effect of the presence of a live or stuffed animal on the communication output of a demented Alzheimer's patient therefore providing insights on which of the two animals has a greater effect. The study also provided insights into the responses of the patient after the withdrawal of the stuffed animal thus making it possible to deduce or design the nature and duration of animal assisted therapy programs in the future. However, there was only one subject during this study hence the results obtained may not necessarily be applicable to men who are also affected by Alzheimer's disease.

The impairment of the cognitive and memory functions as a result of Alzheimer's disease affects the behaviour of the patient. Some of the behaviours exhibited by Alzheimer's patients include: restlessness, pacing, repetitiveness and wandering. It is against this background that the in-house staff at an urban medical facility carried out a study on the effect of animal therapy on 22 patients who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or a related disorder. The problem behaviours of the patients were documented by the staff using the Nursing Home Behaviour Problem Scale (NHBPS) prior to the introduction of a dog in the unit housing the patients.

The dog introduced for the purposes of therapy was a mature neutered male blue heeler aged 4 years which had frequent access to the unit housing the study subjects. The behaviour of the patients was recorded after the

introduction of a dog using the NHBPS. The medications that were being administered to the patients in order to quell the problem behaviours were also recorded. A decline in the occurrence of problem behaviours during was noted during the first 2 weeks of the study but during the night, there were no notable changes in the behaviours of the patient. The limitation of the study was that it was only carried out in one set up with small sample of patients as the subjects thus limiting the generalization of findings to other patients with Alzheimer's disease. Future research ought to be carried out in different settings and involve a bigger sample size.

Alzheimer's disease is characterized by a change in social behaviour which includes isolation and agitation. In an effort to understand the effect of pet therapy on improving the social behaviour of Alzheimer's disease, a study was conducted by Urichuk and Anderson (2003). The study entailed observing the effect of temporal and permanent placement of a dog on twelve patients at a veterans' home. Five minute sessions were carried out during which the dog was absent, temporarily present or permanently present. The sessions were taped and the social behaviour such as smiling, touching and maintaining eye contact with people were tallied throughout the course of the study. A significant increase in maintaining eye contact, smiling and touching was reported during sessions when the dog was present. However, the researchers reported that there was no significant difference in the improvement of the social behaviour when the dog was present temporarily and when it was permanently present during the therapy sessions. In spite providing insights on the effect of pets on social behaviour in demented patients, the study also had several weaknesses: the

study only involved twelve patients thus the results may not necessarily be applied to the general population. In addition to this, the researchers did not seek to establish whether all the patients suffered from dementia as a result of Alzheimer's or other conditions. There was also no distinction between negative and positive social behaviour given that the researchers only focused on positive social behaviour. During the group sessions, the behaviour of the patients was monitored on a rotational basis instead of simultaneously. This left room for errors during the study.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the evidence from studies that have previously been conducted, it can be concluded that pet therapy can be beneficial to patients with Alzheimer's disease. It has been found that the use of pets for therapeutic purposes has been found to have a calming effect on Alzheimer's patients, lead to a decrease in problem behaviour, lead to an improvement in nutritional intake and enhancement of positive social behaviour. In most of the previously conducted studies, only a small sample of patients with Alzheimer's was studied. Future studies should involve larger samples of patients in order to enhance the reproducibility of the results obtained. In addition to this, studies involving patients with dementia ought to involve preliminary screening sessions in order to determine if there are other causes of dementia besides Alzheimer's disease. The nurses can encourage closely monitored pet sessions for patients with Alzheimer's disease in addition to pharmacological forms of therapy.

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