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Publication date:
2017

Citation for published version (APA):
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Nursing home staff perceptions of visiting dogs’ relevance for people with dementia

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Poster presented at 3rd Biannual Liwing with Animals Conference (LWA3), Eastern Kentucky University, March 22-25, 2017

The problem
• Many residents in nursing homes have dementia, and as the condition progresses, activity options narrow down, behavioural and psychological symptoms such as apathy or agitation increase, and opportunities for pleasant encounters decrease (Cadieux et al, 2013).
• This burdens staff of nursing homes, too, and burned-out staff provides poorer care, which in turn increase symptoms of dementia (Barbosa et al., 2015).
• Visiting dogs remain a viable option for even people with severe dementia (Bernabei et al, 2013; Thodberg et al, 2016).
• Rossetti (2008) explored animal assisted therapy as positive for staff

Method
The study is part of the “Between visit effects?” dimension of a project investigating how to improve dog visits at nursing homes. (Thodberg et al, 2015)
After an experimental series of dog visits run by KT, TGBH conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (1 hour) with nursing home day team members (N=3). Arrangements were made by nursing home management.
The interview guide addressed the three themes of the objective, including questions about between visit effects and pros/cons.
Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and cross-case analysis was applied by TGBH & CG.

The epistemological approach is critical realism (Lund, 2005), and themes were semantically derived, theoretically governed by the three aspects expected from the literature and made explicit in the objective and interview guide (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006). 

Predominant themes and subthemes were found in all interviews. Names are pseudonyms.

Objective
Explore staff descriptions of visiting dogs’ impact on residents with dementia, themselves, and the ward milieu.

Joy
“the dog arrives and our residents’ start ‘ohh- it’s so lovely’” (Birgitta)
“she had no language and was in a wheelchair and could do nothing, just sitting there all day, ... but to see when a dog comes, it made a difference that people do not make” (Tina)

Expression
Welcomes dogs with warm voice
If no language: smiling, happy sounds.

Contagious
“I think it’s lovely. Just seeing residents so happy…” (Sara)

Positive conversation
“When I talk about the dog, and they become all happy in the face” (Sara)

Reminiscence
“he talks enthusiastically about dogs he has had” (Tina)
“she says ‘oh when I was a kid I had this dog, King” (Birgitta)

Conclusion
Staff members describe impact on residents as strong and positive.
Impact on the staff themselves is described as indirect; interviewees tone of voice also turns warm and smiling when recalling episodes of residents with dogs. Staff members describe no general impact on the ward milieu, neither positive nor negative, even when prompted.

References