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## **Something to Smile About**

*Visiting Dogs at Nursing Homes*

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*Publication date:*  
2017

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Hansen, T. G. B., Glintborg, C., & Thodberg, K. (2017). *Something to Smile About: Visiting Dogs at Nursing Homes*. Poster presented at Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington D.C., District of Columbia, United States.

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# Something to Smile About: Visiting Dogs at Nursing Homes

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*Abstract: Visiting dog programmes to nursing homes have become popular and recent studies suggest that such visits benefit even people with dementia (PwD) who no longer take much interest in human visitors. This could be very important, since PwD is a growing population group and put special demands on long term care. As dementia progresses and the options of pleasant activities narrow down, apathy, agitation, and other behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD) tend to increase, and the opportunities for pleasant encounters decrease. This is a problem for the PwD and their caregivers alike. Moreover, the relationship between BPSD and strains on long term care staff seems to form a vicious cycle: BPSD is a major cause of staff burn-out; staff burn-out reduces quality of care; and poor quality of care increases BPSD. We conducted a narrative review to derive a model of how visiting dogs may counteract this vicious cycle. Findings from five areas were integrated: Behavioural and Psychological Symptoms of Dementia; Needs of People with Dementia in Long Term Care; Wellbeing and Burnout in Dementia Care Staff; Animal Assisted Interventions in Nursing Homes; and Psychosocial Effects of Human Animal Interactions. We found that visiting dog programmes can have several relevant effects: positive affect during the immediate encounter, the dog as cue to reminiscence, touching the dog as stress-relief for residents and staff; increased conversation during visits and beyond, the dog as catalyst of positive perceptions of strangers, and several others. The poster concludes with the integrated model of probable pathways, state of the evidence for each aspect, and implications for future research.*

**Problem:** Dementia: BPSD  
Caregiver bournout

**Question:** How may visiting dogs counteract?

**Aim:** Hypothetical model

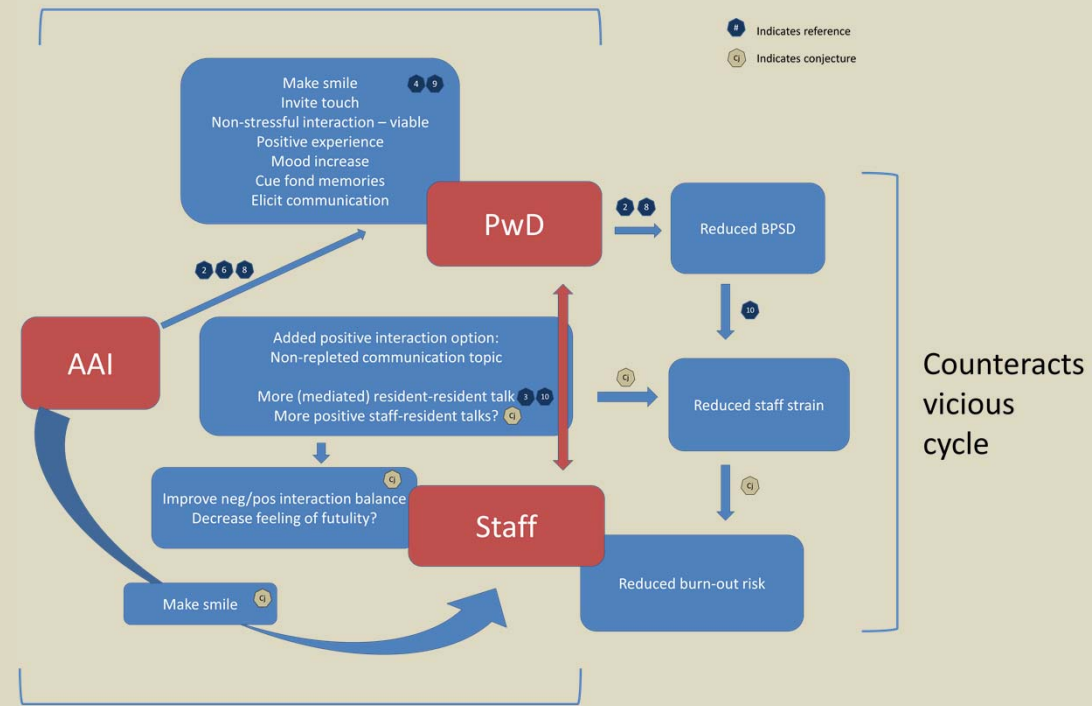
**Method:** Selective review of 5 fields

<b>Needs of persons with dementia (PwD) in long term care</b>	Many residents in nursing homes have dementia and are dependent on staff for psychological and social needs. Dementia is a progressive disease. As the condition progresses, PwDs' activity options narrow down, and opportunities for pleasant encounters decrease.
<b>Behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD)</b>	Concurrently, BPSD such as apathy or agitation increase <sup>5</sup> . BPSD are a consequence of dementia but influenced by context, e.g., stimulus deprivation, or stress. Up to 90 % of BPSD is suggested to stem from poor care rather than dementia itself <sup>5</sup> .
<b>Wellbeing and burnout in dementia care staff</b>	BPSD is a strain on caregivers and suggested to be a major cause of burn-out in nursing home staff <sup>1</sup> . Burned-out staff provides poorer care <sup>1,5</sup> , which in turn increase symptoms of dementia.
<b>Psychosocial effects of Human Animal Interaction</b>	<b>Provided that people like dogs</b> , seeing dogs cause smiling, touching lowers stress, interaction increases oxytocin. Dogs also catalyse positive perceptions of strangers and increased propensity to talk (possibly about the dogs, and memories they cue). Some studies also report reduced loneliness, enhanced mood, reduced depression <sup>4</sup> .
<b>Animal Assisted Interventions in nursing homes (AAI)</b>	PwD – even in late stages – take interest in visiting dogs <sup>2,9</sup> . Frequently reported effects of dog visits include reduced resident agitation <sup>2,8</sup> , apathy and general problem behaviour <sup>10</sup> , reduced noise in the ward <sup>8</sup> , and improved social interaction <sup>2,6,8</sup> . Staff distress with BPSD is also reduced <sup>10</sup> .

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## Improvement for resident



## Relief for staff

### Evidence, conjecture and research implications

Many pathways of the model, notably direct effects of AAI on residents, are supported by several studies. Studies with strong designs and large Ns are still sparse but some exist. Staff implications are underresearched. Most staff related pathways in the model are conjectures or based on informal observations. Future studies should address whether AAI increases positive staff resident-communication, decreases staff feelings of futulity, and reduce staff burn-out risk.

If considering an animal assisted intervention, please consult dog welfare and best practice guidelines?