



A conceptual study about animal-assisted interventions in the province of Antwerp (Belgium)

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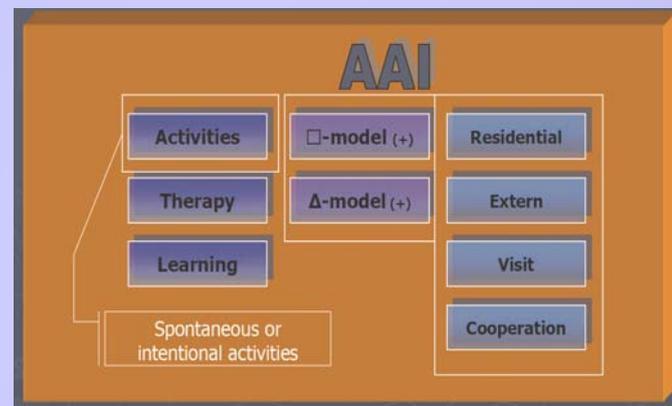
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INTRODUCTION

- During the past 20 years, worldwide a growing number of health care facilities and educational settings have started animal-assisted intervention (AAIs) programs
- Animal-assisted interventions (Samuels et al., 2006) involve animals in activities (AAA), therapy (AAT) and learning & education (AAE/L) to promote well-being of clients:
 - Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) denotes that client oriented therapeutic goals are set and progress records are kept
 - Animal-assisted activities (AAA) are programs without specific goals for each client
 - Animal-assisted learning/education (AAE/L) includes educational goals for each student



- Aim of this study:** (1) map the prevalence of AAIs in Antwerp (a Belgian province)
(2) identify possible welfare problems

MATERIAL AND METHOD

- Respondents: Out of the 374 institutions that were contacted, 323 institutions completed the survey of which 144 elderly homes, 18 centres for palliative care, 28 clinics, 61 institutions for people with mental or physical disabilities, and 72 centres for youth at risk
- A semi-structured survey consisted out of several topics concerning such as information about the facilities, the AAI-practitioners, the AAI programme itself, selection of the AAI animals, education and training, working conditions as well as animal welfare and the overall impact of the AAI-program (positive en negative effects)

RESULTS

Eighty-one percent of these facilities offer AAIs, mainly (81%) involving residential or visiting animals that provide for various activities. Animals involved in AAI programmes are dogs (36%), horses/ponies (20%), farm animals (15%), rodents (11%), birds (10%), or cats (4%). Other species (<1%) are dolphins, snakes, fish, spiders, falcons, snails, foxes and a ferret. Fifty percent of the AAIs had goals such as improving physical activity (16%), cognitive skills (15%), psychological abilities (13%), rendering activities more interesting (11%), reaching individual goals (9%) and improving social contact (8%). Thirty-six percent of the programs kept records on the activities and five percent on the animals themselves. **Thirty percent of the respondents report occasional negative effects for the AAI animals.** Problems differ strongly and include various forms of animal neglect, animal abuse, aggression towards the animals, stress signals such as hiding and running away from clients, etc.. Three report even describe the killing of the AAI animal during sessions: one due to chasing the animal, another one by carelessness and a third one due to cannibalism by a client suffering from impulse-control issues.

CONCLUSION

These results constitute a source of concern and warrant further investigation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Reference

W.E. Samuels, D. Coultis, L. Meers, S. Normando, and F.O. Ödberg. Can an AAI programme improve animal welfare? Proceedings of the VDWE International Congress on Companion Animal Behaviour and Welfare. 119-128, 2006.