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Animal-Assisted Therapy for Troubled Teens

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Abstract

In the current world, efforts have been made towards invention and innovation of new approaches to care provision, procedures that are perceived as responses to pressure from service users. One of the approaches that have attracted attention is the use of animal-assisted therapy (AAP) among troubled teens. This paper proposes a study whose aim will be to find out the critical role that AAT plays in fostering therapeutic benefits that include reductions in psychological, emotional and behavioral problems among troubled teens. Specifically, the proposed study seeks to collect primary data and incorporate or complement it with existing scholarly contributions from secondary sources. Regarding the primary data, 150 licensed health professionals will be selected and sent questionnaires either by mail or email. With a simple random sampling technique adopted to shun possibilities of social desirability bias, specific issues that the participants will be asked to highlight include trends in AAT adoption, the relationship between AAT application and patient outcomes, and the effect of the duration of troubled teen exposure to AAT procedures on the pace of recovery. Similarly, insights will be gained from the existing health records of some of the patients who may have been admitted previously and either exposed or not exposed to the AAT procedure. As such, the participants will constitute licensed health professionals who have engaged in AAT program implementation and those who are yet to adopt the process, with inferential and descriptive statistics aiding in arriving at valid and reliable conclusions from which practical recommendations will be made. As such, it is hoped that this proposal is well placed and sets a stage from which data will be collected, analyzed and interpreted for inference provision – based on the formulated hypotheses.

Introduction

The current state of the healthcare professional is characterized by innovative and inventive approaches. One of the areas with potential far-reaching implications involves the effect of the human-animal bond as an alternative approach to direct and conventional mechanisms of pain relief, translating into animal-assisted therapy. According to Axen (2015), animal-assisted therapy (AAT) refers to a practice through which animals are used as a treatment platform. The goal of this procedure lies in the need to improve the cognitive, emotional and social functioning of patients. As advocated by Bachi, Terkel and Teichman (2012), animals can be a useful source of motivational and educational effectiveness among patient groups. Indeed, various reasons prompt the need to focus on animal-assisted therapy as an effective educational and motivational procedure for addressing different psychological and behavioral issues among troubled teens. Specifically, negative effects arising from the use of experimental drugs attract the use of animal-assisted therapy. For example, negative effects arising from the use of alcohol and experimental drugs include stalled progress in family, social, and academic life (Balluerka, Muela, Amiano & Caldentey, 2014). Whereas various groups of troubled teens have been exposed to alternative approaches such as art therapy, family therapy, group therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, problem-solving therapy and psychoanalytic therapy, animal-assisted therapy is yet to gain an in-depth analysis and application among patient groups (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013). On the one

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hand, Berget, Ekenerg and Braastad (2008) asserted that animal-assisted therapy poses significant success upon application in pediatric care, dementia patients, nursing homes, and institutional care. On the other hand, Burgon (2011) observed that animal-assisted therapy is yet to a wide scale application among healthcare organizations or settings. The proposed study seeks to establish and understand the critical role played by animal-assisted therapy in fostering therapeutic benefits of reduced psychological, emotional and behavioral problems among troubled teens. In the following section, background information regarding AAT program implementation and its implications is provided.

Methods

In the study, both qualitative and quantitative aspects arising from the incorporation of AAT in health care service provision will be collected; constituting a mixed studies approach. Whereas quantitative studies entail numerical measurements in which researchers handle figure through statistical models for inference-making and data explanation (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), qualitative research entails collecting, analyzing and interpreting data by observing the activities of participant groups, as well as the views presented by research or target populations (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). The observation criterion will aid in understanding the participants' characteristics and preferences regarding AAT program adoption and implementation while quantitative models such as the use of graphs, statistical tables and frequency distribution tables will be used to give an insight into the trends and effects of AAT program adoption within the target population. It is further notable that information from secondary sources will be used to complement primary research outcomes. Some of these sources include journals, newspapers and magazines documenting trends and the impact of AAT programs on physiological and cognitive health improvement among troubled teens. Indeed, the level of concurrence between the existing scholarly contributions contained in secondary sources and that of the proposed study's primary outcomes will aid in informing about potential positive and negative outcomes that could accrue from AAT therapy, upon which valid and reliable recommendations will be made towards sensitizing the community, healthcare practitioners, parents, guardians and other relevant authorities or agencies.

One of the demerits of the mixed methods research is that it is prone to social desirability bias in situations where participants exist in multicultural settings. In addition, the approach is prone to outcome manipulation and interference in situations where researchers intervene to guide the participants during data collection (Creswell, 2009). However, the technique is advantageous in such a way that it fosters a broader perspective in which experiments reveal and address anomalies that may have been made during observation. In addition, the method leads to the collection of more or comprehensive and in-depth data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), upon which the resultant analysis, interpretation, discussion and inference-making may be valid and highly reliable (Gholamreza and Hasan, 2010).

Results

Statistical outcomes depicting the use of animal-assisted therapy affirm that the procedure poses promising outcomes but its application or adoption remains worth addressing. According to

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Dana and Chandler (2011), animals are known for the manner in which they portray a nurturing behavior and this trend accounts for the important role they continue to play in the lives of humans, either as trained companion animals or as pets. In a related study, Dell, Chalmers, Bresette, Swain, Rankin & Hopkins, 2011; Ward, Whalon, Rusnak, Wendell & Paschall, 2013) asserted that recent years have witnessed the ability of animals to function as more than pets and operate as healers among human guardians. In a study by Dietz, Davis and Pennings (2012), it was affirmed that animals pose a significant effect on the social development of children. For instance, AAT aids in the reduction of fear while lowering the systolic blood pressure among hospitalized children, suggesting that the approach continues to be associated with promising physiological effects. Despite this trend, research establishing the effectiveness of AAT among patients of all ages remains scarce. More so, most of the research focusing on AAT has been found to be conducted among (or target) adults, especially the elderly group (Goddard & Gilmer, 2015).

Some of the domesticated pets that aid in AAT programs include guinea pigs, cats, and dogs while farm animals include potbellied pigs and horses. On the other hand, marine animals such as dolphins are also used in AAT programs (Maujean, Kendall, Lillan, Sharp & Pringle, 2013). Regardless of the animal that AAT programs use, this approach has been documented to offer person-centered experiences that aid in wellbeing and health augmentation by improving the quality of life and the mental outlook, reducing loneliness, decreasing anxiety, and lowering the blood pressure (Reed, Ferrer & Villegas, 2012). However, it is worth noting that this documentation falters in such a way that it does not explain some of the physiological and psycho-social changes that the presence of these animals introduces while striving to achieve the aforementioned positive outcomes. Similarly, the documentation does not explain whether differences in the magnitude or degree of feelings of the positive outcomes in trouble teens exist (compared to members from other age groups), and if so, some of the specific differences that the children are likely to exhibit.

Targeting individuals with cognitive, emotional, social and physical problems, AAT is individualized to respective patients and requires stated goals for each session. In situations where experimental studies have been conducted in children populations, emotional, psychological and physiological benefits have been reported. For instance, Risley-Curtiss (2010) conducted a study on canine visitations with children in pain. Outcomes showed overarching themes that were attributable to anxiety reduction. Specific outcomes included distraction form situations or the pain, introduction of happiness and pleasure, pain easement, calming and company provision. Other effects included enjoyment of contact with the dog and snuggling, reminding the child of home, and entertainment. A similar study was conducted by Solomon (2010) in children aged 17 and below, who were exposed to AAT with a dog. Results depicted a significant reduction in pain. Thus, these studies reveal positive outcomes when AAT programs are applied in troubled teen groups, as well as other children. Imperative to highlight is that the studies do not explain some of the lasting effects that AAT poses, should the animals be withdrawn at some point.

Another study by Ward, Whalon, Rusnak, Wendell and Paschall (2013) focused on AAT program application in trouble teens. Findings suggested that 89 percent of children exposed to the program were likely to exhibit increased appetite and independence, besides decreased pain and fear of procedures and treatment. Furthermore, a descriptive pilot study targeting 5- to 18-year-olds by

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Williams (2013) used a scale of 1 to 10 with sad and happy faces respectively. Outcomes indicated that a significant decrease in emotional distress and physical pain was likely to arise from AAT program adoption and implementation in the troubled group. In the study, a therapy dog would spend children postoperatively. Activities included doing tricks on command for the children, being petted by the children, and watching television with the children. However, it is notable that this study was limited in such a way that a small convenience sample was used, compromising the possible generalization of the results to larger-population settings and regions with demographic, geographical, economic and socio-cultural differences.

AAT application has also had its success reported in children who have been neglected or abused with subsequent insecure attachments. According to Axen (2015), clinical example reveal that the use of AAT with children who have been abused or neglected helps increase communication and foster trust in situations where they exhibit a strong distrust in adults. For autistic children, AAT program implementation was documented by Bachi, Terkel and Teichman (2012) to increase participation especially when therapy dogs are present. However, studies focusing on specific physiological and cognitive effects experienced by troubled teens with similar conditions remain scarce; a gap that the proposed study seeks to fill.

Conclusion

This paper proposes a study whose aim will be to find out the critical role that AAT plays in fostering therapeutic benefits that include reductions in psychological, emotional and behavioral problems among troubled teens. Specifically, the proposed study seeks to collect primary data and incorporate or complement it with existing scholarly contributions from secondary sources. Regarding the primary data, 150 licensed health professionals will be selected and sent questionnaires either by mail or email. With a simple random sampling technique adopted to shun possibilities of social desirability bias, specific issues that the participants will be asked to highlight include trends in AAT adoption, the relationship between AAT application and patient outcomes, and the effect of the duration of troubled teen exposure to AAT procedures on the pace of recovery. From the findings, AAT application has had its success reported in children who have been neglected or abused with subsequent insecure attachments.

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