INTRODUCTION

Animal Assisted Therapy: An Effective Solution for Symptoms of Dementia in Institutionalized Elderly Patients

Methods

The literature search for this study was conducted using Elsevier’s Scopus for all studies testing the effects of animal-assisted therapy (AAT). An initial search was conducted using the keyword “animal assisted therapy” and then narrowed down with appropriate filters. Secondary and tertiary search categories, “Alzheimer’s” and “nursing home, institutionalized,” were also included in the search to narrow the results. The literature review was conducted using electronic databases, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The initial search was conducted in June 2016, with updates conducted in December 2016. A systematic approach was used to review the literature. The literature review was conducted using electronic databases, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of animal-assisted therapy on symptoms of dementia in institutionalized elderly patients?

METHODS

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Results

Table 1: Summary of characteristics of participants, features of interventions, and primary findings, and quality ratings of studies included the structured literature review. Legend of terms and abbreviations below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Characteristics of participants</th>
<th>Features of the intervention</th>
<th>Primary findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>Elderly patients, institutionalized, N = 71</td>
<td>Frequency: 1/week, intervention sessions with dog, the guide and resident, Frequency: 1/week, intervention sessions with dog, the guide and resident,</td>
<td>Improved overall behavior (nonverbal, cooperation, sleep, eating, social interaction, incontinence).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>Elderly patients, institutionalized, N = 50</td>
<td>Frequency: 4/week, intervention sessions with dog, the guide and resident, Frequency: 4/week, intervention sessions with dog, the guide and resident,</td>
<td>Physical activity increased over time for AAT group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>Elderly patients, institutionalized, N = 20</td>
<td>Frequency: 3/week, intervention sessions with dog, the guide and resident, Frequency: 3/week, intervention sessions with dog, the guide and resident,</td>
<td>No significant improvement for either group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIMITATIONS

Many of the studies utilized a small sample size, leading to possible generalization limits. Some of the samples utilized were not randomized, and lacked clear inclusion and exclusion criteria which threatened internal validity. Many studies included dementia patients with different types of dementia, medications which could cause a variation in findings between subjects. None of these, finally examined some of the effects of AAT treatment intervention throughout the individual’s lifetime.

Discussion

The introduction of AAT into dementia care units is an effective and cost-efficient intervention that can be an alternative to traditional pharmacological treatments. AAT enriches the environment and quality of life for elderly people living with dementia without dramatically increasing staff workload. Further research should include RCTs investigating the long-term effects of AAT in larger and more diverse samples specific focusing on adaptive AAT and artificial or virtual reality.