The experience of a pet therapy visit on patients in an acute care setting

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Greetings from Massachusetts General Hospital
Pet Therapy Program

- Collaborative program between the department of nursing and the volunteer department
- Established at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) in February of 2003
- 82,284 recorded visits with patients and countless visits with visitors and staff
MGH Pet Therapy Volunteers
Pet Therapy Program

- MGH Volunteers
- Professionally Screened Dogs and Handlers
- Inclusion and Exclusion criteria
- Nurse driven intervention and evaluation
- Voluntary patient participation
Pet Therapy Program

- Therapy dogs visit nine inpatient units, one intensive care unit and radiation oncology unit each week on Tuesdays and Thursdays

- Currently have 12 therapy dogs
  - The smallest dog is a Yorkie named Maggie
  - Majority of the other dogs are medium breeds such as Golden Retrievers and Labradors
This Floor Participates in The Pet Therapy Program

Visits with Dogs:
Tuesday & Thursday afternoons

Ask your nurse if you are interested in participating in this program.
Therapeutic Effect of Pet Therapy

“There’s no doubting his skills, but you have to command him to ‘heal’ first.”
Pet Therapy Literature

- Florence Nightingale recognized the therapeutic value of pets. “A pet bird in a cage is sometimes the only pleasure of an invalid” (1860)

- Patient responses to this intervention include feeling happy, more calm and less lonely after a pet visit (Cole & Gawlinski, 1995)

- Patients reported feeling happy, comforted, satisfied, relaxed, attached and peaceful after a dog visit (Coakley & Somerville, 2003)

- Overall, pet therapy programs continue to flourish, but there is a lack of evidence, particularly well controlled clinical trials supporting its use.
Pet Therapy Research

Limited research indicates that people benefit from visits with animals:

- Reduced anxiety, depression and loneliness (Martin, 1993, Motitz, 2002)
- Decreased pain level, increased level of energy and improved overall mood (POMS) (Coakley & Mahoney, 2009)
The purpose of this study was to explore the outcomes related to well-being, stress and comfort in patients who participate in the dog pet therapy program at MGH.

Study supported by the Magellan fund established in honor of “Magellan”, a beloved pet therapy dog after his death in 2015.
MGH Research Study

- Study approved by the MGH Institutional Review Board
- Fifty-five patients were recruited and consented to participate in the study, which was done on three inpatient units
Methodology

- This study employed a descriptive, non-experimental design and a convenience sample to explore the experience of a dog pet therapy program.
- Measures included: vital signs, visual analog scale (VAS) of comfort and well-being, the Spielberger state anxiety index and salivary cortisol levels.
- Demographic variables related to the sample were captured and statistics were applied to the demographic variables.

Analysis

- Data analyzed using SPSS with a series of paired t-tests.
Results

- Sample included 55 adult subjects with 25 males and 30 females, who were predominately Caucasian, 52 were pet owners and their ages ranged from 21-80 years of age.
- Significant reduction in pulse, blood pressure and respiratory rate $p<.05$
- Improved level of comfort and well being $p<.05$
- Improved levels of anxiety $p<.000$
- Non-significant results salivary cortisol $p=.769$
Conclusion & Implications

- A dog pet therapy program in an acute care hospital setting is beneficial to patients in regards to their level of comfort and well-being.
- While biomarkers related to blood pressure and pulse were useful measures, the use of salivary cortisol was challenging in the clinical environment.
- The findings from this research provide the foundation for and underscore the need for randomized control clinical trial research supporting this type of program.
Acknowledgement

- The authors of this study would like to acknowledge the staff on the three inpatient units, in particular: Julie Cronin, DNP, RN, OCN, Helen Papele BSN, RN, CNRN, Emily Olmstead BSN, RN, Trish Zeytoonjian MSN RN-BC, Adele Keeley MA, RN, NEA-BC
- The volunteers and dogs who participate in the Pet Therapy program
- Special thank you to Diane Carroll PhD, RN, FESC, FAAN for her assistance with data analysis
Thank You