

## COMPANION ANIMALS IN THE LIVES OF PERSONS WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Mara M. Baun, D.N.Sc., FAAN  
University of Texas-Houston School of Nursing

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is a slow, progressive neurological disorder that leads to cognitive dysfunction. Behavior disorders, such as agitation, aggression, wandering, incontinence and vocalizations, are common and problematic, particularly as the disease progresses. Pharmacologic interventions provide some alleviation of behavioral problems, but non-pharmacologic interventions can be effective also. One non-pharmacologic intervention for which there is a small research base is the use of companion animals as therapeutic interventions.

The use of a therapy dog with persons with AD has resulted in increased socialization (Batson, McCabe, Baun, & Wilson, 1998; Churchill, Safaoui, McCabe, & Baun, 1999), improved social behaviors (Kongable, Stolley, & Buckwalter, 1990) and decreased agitation (Churchill et al., 1999). When a resident dog was introduced on an AD special care unit, the number of problem behaviors decreased and remained decreased across the entire four weeks of the study (McCabe, Baun, Speich, & Agrawal, 2002). Persons with AD who were residents of a private home had fewer episodes of verbal aggression and anxiety and fewer mood disorders when they had regular contact with a companion animal (Fritz, Farver, Kass, & Hart, 1995). Residents of AD special care units increased nutritional intake which continued over a six weeks when Aquariums were introduced in the dining rooms. This increased nutritional intake resulted in increased weight gain among the residents (Edwards & Beck, 2002).

Although the number of studies of the effect of companion animals in lives of persons with AD are limited, positive effects have been demonstrated and so far no reported negative effects. Obviously, much more research needs to be done. Informal observations of the interactions of persons with AD and animals has been positive. Persons with AD who reside in special care units which have incorporated animals into the environment appear to benefit from the animals presence. Careful planning needs to occur, however, prior to the introduction of any animal into either a private home or special care unit.

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