

**Animal-Assisted Therapy in a Nursing Home Alzheimer Special Care Unit.** Debra Buttram, Giovanni Bigatello, Pasquale Fresca, Marcello Galimberti, Istituto Geriatrico Ca' d'Industria ed Uniti Lughè Pii, 22100, Como Italy and AIUCA (Associazione Italiana Uso Cani d'Assistenza), 23042, Bosisio Parini (LC), Italy Presentation from the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions, People and Animals: A Timeless Relationship, Glasgow, Scotland, October 6-9 2004.

It has already been demonstrated that programs of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) can produce beneficial effects on persons affected with Alzheimer's disease (AD). Of particular interest has been the observation of a reduction in behavior alterations and mood disorders and an increase in social interactions. Starting with these pretences in January 2000, the institute and the association decided to elaborate a particular program of AAT for the Alzheimer Special Care Unit (ASCU) of the nursing home. Persons in the ASCU have severe Behavioural and Psychological Systems of Dementia (BPSD) (UCLA Scale > 24, MMSE < 16).

The program is conducted in a separate room of the ASCU and is directed by facility staff. Two specially prepared and evaluated handler-dog teams, registered Delta Society<sup>®</sup> Pet Partners<sup>®</sup>, are directly involved in the 90-minute twice weekly sessions. The dogs are 6-year-old female Golden Retrievers and the handlers are one male and one female. In the beginning, all 19 persons recovered in the ASCU were invited to enter in the room and interact with the dog. Any patient not wanting to interact or who showed displeasure was gently accompanied out of the room. Normally, 12 to 17 persons remained in the room and took part in petting, brushing, giving treats and water, walking with and/or to the dog, giving commands, talking to and/or about the dog. During this time, the patients were asked to evoke possible memories and experiences with animals and to respond to precise questions regarding the dog, the dog's habits and needs and the interpretation of the dog's behavior.

In general, we have noted a discreet increase in attention spans, a marked increase in interactions between patients, a reduction in their behavioral problems, better mood disposition and verbal interactions that sometimes are pertinent to the context. These changes are noted when the dog is present even if not directly interacting with the patient at the moment.

In order to evaluate the treatments in a more rigorous way, 11 patients have been tested utilizing the short version of the Severe Impairment Battery (SIB). Evaluations were made both before the session and afterwards, with the dog present. The first results demonstrate an improvement in various items when the patient is examined in the presence of the dog as opposed to the base-line results. A particular improvement in the language area was noticed and also a slight reduction in cognitive alterations.

Given such results, we deem an AAT program with persons affected by AD to be an efficacious resource meriting ulterior implementation and evaluation.

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