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Animal assisted therapy from the perspective of the medical staff and patients

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

This work aims to obtain information on the opinion of health professionals and patients regarding the effects of animal assisted therapy/activity (AAT).

METHODS

An opinion poll was conducted with the medical team (consisting of: doctors, nurses, psychologists) and patients (male and female gender over 18 years of age) on the use of animal assisted therapy through application through application of the questionnaire by the Google Forms platform, being applied only once; participants were selected for convenience.

RESULTS

According to the groups surveyed 65.62% of participants reported already knowing AAT, being better known in the group of health professionals, among these 6.71% have already participated in some intervention of the type. In terms of risk/benefit to AAT, it gives more benefits than risk according to 75.03% of participants. Regarding species considered viable for the application of this therapy, 92.63%of participants believe that the dog would be the most appropriate animal, followed by the cat (66.84%) and the horse (55.66%). According to health professionals, children (90.5%), followed by elderly (87.1%) and autistic (73.6%) are the groups that benefited the most from AAT.

CONCLUSION

Through this study it was possible to see that in the general population, men and women, the knowledge of animal assisted therapy is still little widespread when compared to health professionals. In addition, studies focused on proof of physiological benefits to the patient are still incipient and have limitations on the number of participants and methodology.

DESCRIPTORS

Animal Assisted Therapy, AAT, children, elderly, autistic, health professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is based on the human-animal relationship, built and described since ancient civilizations, in which animals were essential for protection and assistance in the daily activities carried out by populations[1], and domestication was one of the strengthening pillars in the construction of a loving bond between man and animal, which lasts until the present day[2].

TAA is a therapy that uses animals as an instrument to promote emotional, physical, social, and cognitive improvement in patients. It also involves the participation of the patient's medical team in the perception and direction of the therapy, always being established goals for the therapeutic evaluation. In addition, it follows standards and protocols that guarantee the well-being and non-maleficence not only of the patient, but also of the animals used[1,2].

The application of AAT, in turn, can be performed in patients of different age groups and diagnoses. It is performed with the help of various animals such as horses, dogs, cats, fish, among others. To receive the animal, the patient or guardian must agree to receive visits, as well as the medical team must agree and collaborate with the therapy. In addition, animals are selected based on the following criteria: friendly behaviour with strangers, being used to the hospital environment, must be properly vaccinated, and must obey commands[3]. This type of therapy is practiced in several hospitals around the world, focusing on the collaboration of professionals in human health, animals, and their tutors[4].

In Brazil, in turn, pioneering the use of animals for therapy began at the Dom Pedro II hospital in Rio de Janeiro. This fact started unexpectedly, when the doctor saw a puppy at the hospital door and suggested that one of her patients take care of her, which she accepted. From then on, the benefits that the animal brought to its patient were noticed, therefore, studies on the use of the dog as a therapist began[1,5].

Through research carried out over decades of its application, it is inferred that Animal Assisted Therapy in hospitalized patients confers benefits in several aspects related to the quality of life of these individuals. Generally, it is possible to cite considerable improvements in communication, socialization, receptiveness to treatment, reduction of stress and, as a consequence, improvement in heart rate and blood pressure[6].

In short, TAA is a promising health care resource that is gradually gaining ground in Brazil and showing its positive results[6]. However, because it is an incipient method, it requires even more in-depth research on this topic so that the various areas in which this therapy proposes improvements are verified[6].

This work aims to obtain information on the opinion of health professionals and patients regarding the effects of animal-assisted therapy/activity.

METHODS

An evaluation survey was carried out with the medical team (composed of: Doctors, Nurses, Psychologists) and patients (male and female, over 18 years of age), on the use of animal-assisted therapy. This work was authorized by the Ethics and Research Committee of Universidade Santo Amaro and registered on Plataforma Brasil, with opinion number 4.390.090.

The application of the questionnaire took place through the Google Forms Platform, being applied only once and the participants were selected for convenience. .

RESULTS

The results found will be presented according to the interviewed group, as follows:

1. Animal Assisted Therapy: Benefits obtained from the perspective of Adult Patients.

A total of 316 people over 18 years of age were interviewed, in which 155/316 (49.1%) were unaware of the therapy and 161/316 (50.9%) were aware of it. 4/316 (1.3%) had participated in an Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) session and 312/316 (98.8%) had never participated in such a procedure.

Of the people interviewed, the perceptions about the presence of animals in a hospital environment were as follows: a) 229/316 (72.5%) of people believe that AAT confers more benefits than risks; b) 84/316 (26.6%) do not have a formed opinion on the matter; c) 2/316 (0.6%) opined that AAT confers more risks than benefits; d) 1/316 (0.3%) believe that the therapy does not cause any kind of effect on the participants.

Regarding the animals that could participate in the TAA, horses were the choice of 49.4% (156/316) of the people; 92.7% (293/316) of respondents reported dogs; 63.3% (200/316) of the answers found in the questionnaire selected cats; 49.1% (155/316) chose the hamster; 52.9% (167/316), 39.9% (126/316), 44.7% (141/316) of the participants selected the rabbit, turtle and fish, respectively.

316/316 (100%) of the responses report believing that AAT is capable of promoting improvement in the treatment of people. 293/316 (92.7%) would accept to participate in such a procedure and 21/316 (6.7%) would not accept to participate.

274/316 (86.7%) of people believe that AAT reduces patient stress; 273/316 (86.4%) believe that it improves the patient's mood; 234/316 (74.1%) responded that they probably improved patient adherence to the proposed treatment; 152/316 (48.1%) believe that the patient participating in an AAT will have a general physiological improvement in their clinical condition; 188/316 (27.9%) believe in improved patient socialization.

According to the answers found in the questionnaire regarding the affinity of the interviewees with animals, the answers were: 206/316 (65.2%) classified it as excellent; 82/316 (26%) reported it as good; 28/316 (8.9%) believe it to be regular.

303/316 (95.9%) of people believe that the presence of animals would make the hospital environment more welcoming; however, 13/316 (4.1%) do not believe it, as shown in table 1.

2. Animal-Assisted Therapy: Benefits obtained from the perspective of Physicians.

A total of 153 physicians were interviewed, of which 22/153 (14.4%) were not aware of the therapy and 131/153 (85.6%) were aware of it. 10/153 (6.6%) had participated in an Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) session, however, 143/153 (93.5%) had never participated in such a procedure.

Of the people interviewed, the perceptions about therapy in a hospital environment were as follows: a) 118/153 (77.1%) believe that AAT confers more benefits than risks; b) 32/153 (20.9%) have no formed opinion on the matter; c) 1/153 (0.7%) thought that this procedure should be further analyzed and studied; d) 2/153 (1.3%) reported that the therapy should be performed in an area adjacent to the hospital, not inside the hospital.

Regarding the animals that could participate in the AAT, horses were the choice of 67.9% (104/153) of physicians; 86.9% (133/153) of people reported dogs; 71.3% (109/153) of the answers found in the questionnaire selected cats; 41.2% (63/153) of respondents chose the hamster; 56.9% (87/153), 44.5% (68/153), 38.6% (59/153), 4/153 (2.6%) of the participants selected the rabbit, turtle, fish and birds, respectively.

149/153 (97.4%) of the doctors' responses report that they believe that AAT is capable of promoting improvement in the treatment of people and; 150/153 (98.1%) would agree to submit the patient to such a procedure.

146/153 (95.4%) of physicians believe that AAT reduces pa-

tient stress; 147/153 (96.1%) believe it improves the patient's mood; 98/153 (64.1%) responded that they probably improved patient adherence to the proposed treatment; 86/153 (56.2%) believe that the patient participating in an AAT will have a general physiological improvement in their clinical condition; 138/153 (90.2%) believe in improved patient socialization.

According to the answers found in the questionnaire regarding the profile of patients that physicians would believe that AAT would be more efficient, the answers were: 141/153 (92.2%) would recommend it in children; 139/153 (90.9%) in the elderly; 102/153 (66.7%) in cancer patients; 90/153 (58.9%) in adolescents; 113/153 (73.9%) in autistic individuals; 91/153 (59.5%) in patients with neuropsychomotor impairments and 76/153 (49.7%) in psychiatric patients, as shown in table 1.

3. Animal-assisted therapy: Benefits obtained from the perspective of nurses.

A total of 112 nurses were interviewed, of which 32/112 (28.6%) were not aware of the therapy and 80/112 (71.5%) were aware of it. 11/112 (9.8%) had participated in an Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) session, however, 101/112 (90.2%) had never participated in such a procedure.

Of the people interviewed, the perceptions about therapy in a hospital environment were as follows: a) 82/112 (73.2%) believe that AAT confers more benefits than risks; b) 23/112 (20.6%) have no formed opinion on the matter; c) 1/112 (0.9%) opined that this procedure has no effect on the patient's treatment.

Regarding the animals that could participate in the AAT, horses were the choice of 37.5% (42/112) of nurses; 93.8% (105/112) of people reported dogs; 71.4% (80/112) of the answers found in the questionnaire selected cats; 32.2% (36/112) of respondents chose the hamster; 41.9% (47/112), 34.8% (39/112), 41.1% (46/112) of the participants selected the rabbit, turtle and fish, respectively.

110/112 (98.2%) of the nurses' responses report that they believe that AAT can promote improvement in the treatment of people.

101/112 (90.2%) of respondents believe that AAT reduces patient stress; 99/112 (88.4%) believe that it improves the patient's mood; 87/112 (77.7) responded that it probably improves patient adherence to the proposed treatment; 63/112 (56.3%) believe that the patient participating in an AAT will have a general physiological improvement in their clinical condition; 76/112 (67.9%) believe in improving patient socialization.

95/112 (84.8%) would agree to submit patients to this type of therapy.

According to the answers found in the questionnaire regarding the profile of patients that nurses would believe that AAT would be more efficient, the answers were: 99/112 (88.4%) would recommend it in children; 92/112 (82.1) in the elderly; 75/112 (67%) in cancer patients; 61/112 (54.5%) in adolescents; 73/112 (65.2%) in autistic individuals; 56/112 (50%) in patients with neuropsychomotor impairments and 54/112 (48.2%) in psychiatric patients, as shown in table 1.

4. Animal Assisted Therapy: Benefits obtained from the perspective of Psychologists.

A total of 152 psychologists were interviewed, of which 43/152 (28.3%) were not aware of the therapy and 109/152 (71.7%) were aware of it. 14/152 (9.2%) had participated in an Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) session, however, 138/152 (90.8%) had never participated in such a procedure.

Of the people interviewed, the perceptions about therapy in a hospital environment were as follows: a) 121/152 (79.6%) believe that AAT confers more benefits than risks; b) 30/152 (19.7%) have no formed opinion on the matter; c) 1/152 (0.7%) opined that this procedure has no effect on the patient's treatment.

Regarding the animals that could participate in the AAT, horses were the choice of 69.8% (106/152) of the psychologists; 97.4% (148/152) of people reported dogs; 66.5% (101/152) of the answers found in the questionnaire selected cats; 44.8% (68/152) of respondents chose the hamster; 50% (76/152), 38.2% (58/152), 36.2% (55/152) of the participants selected the rabbit, turtle and fish, respectively.

152/152 (100%) of the psychologists' answers report that they believe that AAT can promote improvement in the treatment of people. 118/152 (77.7) of professionals would accept to participate in a study on AAT, however, 34/152 (22.4%) would not be interested in participating.

135/152 (88.9%) of respondents believe that AAT reduces patient stress; 135/152 (88.9%) believe it improves the patient's mood; 121/152 (79.6%) responded that they probably improved patient adherence to the proposed treatment; 101/152 (66.5%) believe that the patient participating in an AAT will have a general physiological improvement in their clinical condition; 143/152 (94.1%) believe in improving patient socialization.

According to the answers found in the questionnaire regarding the profile of the patients that psychologists would believe that AAT would be more efficient, the answers were: 132/152 (86.9%) would recommend in autistic individuals; 132/152 (86.9%) in depressives; 87/152 (57.3%) in patients with ADHD; 99/152 (65.2%) in people with an anxiety disorder; 96/152 (63.2%) in patients with neuropsychomotor impairments; 96/152 (63.2%) with symptoms of stress, and 5/152 (3.3%) in psychiatric.

Finishing the analysis of the data from the answers to the applied questionnaire, 114/152 (75%) of the interviewed psychologists would submit their patient to Animal Assisted Therapy; 36/152 (23.7%) would perhaps recommend TAA; however, 4/152 (2.7%) would not refer to this procedure, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Results found from the answers obtained from the interviewees submitted to the questioning about the Assisted Therapy of Animals (AAT).

Questions:	General Public	Nurses	Psychologists	Doctors
Know the TAA	161/316 (50,9%)	80/112 (71,4%)	109/152 (71,7%)	131/153 (85,6%)
Don't know the TAA	155/316 (49,1%)	32/112 (28,6%)	43/152 (28,3%)	22/153 (14,4%)
Participated in a TAA session	4/316 (1,2%)	11/112 (9,8%)	14/152 (9,2%)	10/153 (6,6%)
Never Participated in a TAA session	312/316 (98,7%)	101/112 (90,2%)	138/152 (90,8%)	143/153 (93,5%)
TAA confers more benefit than risk to the participant	229/316 (72,4%)	83/112 (73,2%)	121/152 (79,6%)	118/153 (77,1%)
No opinion formed on the impact of TAA on participants	84/316 (26,6%)	23/112 (20,6%)	30/152 (19,7%)	32/153 (20,9%)
The TAA confers more risks than benefits on the participant	2/316 (0,63%)	5/112 (4,4%)	-	1/153 (0,7%)
It is believed that dogs can be used in AAT	293/316 (92,7%)	105/112 (93,8%)	148/152 (97,4%)	133/153 (86,9%)
It is believed that cats can be used in AAT	200/316 (63,2%)	80/112 (71,4%)	101/152 (66,5%)	109/153 (71,3%)
It is believed that horses can be used in TAA	156/316 (49,3%)	42/112 (37,5%)	106/152 (69,8%)	104/153 (67,9%)
It is believed that hamsters can be used in AAT	155/316 (49%)	36/112 (32,2%))	68/152 (44,8%)	63/153 (41,2%)
It is believed that rabbits can be used in TAA	167/316 (52,8%)	47/112 (41,9%)	76/152 (50%)	87/153 (56,9%)
It is believed that turtles can be used in TAA	126/316 (39,9%)	39/112 (34,8%)	58/152 (38,2%)	68/153 (44,5%)
It is believed that fish can be used in TAA	141/316 (44,6%)	46/112 (41,1%)	55/152 (36,2%)	59/153 (38,6%)
They believe that TAA can promote improvements in treatment	316/316 (100%)	110/112 (98,2%%)	152/152 (100%)	149/153 (97,4%)

Would accept to participate in a TAA session	293/316 (92,7%)	-	118/152 (77,7%)	-
Would not accept to participate in a TAA session	21/316 (6,6%)	-	34/152 (22,4%)	-
Would they agree to submit the patient to TAA therapy	-	95/112 (84,8%)	114/152 (75%)	150/153 (98,1%)
Would not accept to submit the patient to AAT therapy	-	-	4/152 (2,7%)	3/153 (1,9%)
Reduces the stress of the participant who underwent TAA therapy	274/316 (86,7%)	101/112 (90,2%)	135/152 (88.9%)	146/153 (95,4%)
Improved mood of the participant who underwent TAA therapy	273/316 (86,4%)	99/112 (88,4%)	135/152 (88,9%)	147/153 (96,1%)
Better adherence to the proposed treatment for the participant who underwent TAA therapy	234/316 (74,1%)	87/112 (77,7%)	121/152 (79,6%)	98/153 (64,1%)
Physiological improvement of the participant who underwent TAA therapy	152/316 (48,1%)	63/112 (56,3%)	101/152 (66,5%)	86/153 (56,2%)
Improves the socialization of the participant who underwent TAA therapy	188/316 (27,9%)	76/112 (67,9%)	143/152 (94,1%)	138/153 (90,2%)
Has a great affinity for animals	206/316 (65,2%)	-	-	-
Has a good affinity with animals	82/316 (26%)	-	-	-
Has a regular affinity for animals	28/316 (8,9%)	-	-	-
They believe that TAA would make the hospital environment more welcoming	303/316 (95,9%)	-	-	-
They do not believe that TAA would make the hospital environment more welcoming	13/316 (4,1%)	-	-	-
Children benefit from TAA	-	99/112 (88,4%)	-	141/153 (92,2%)
Elderly people benefit from AAT	-	92/112 (82,1%)	-	139/153 (90,9%)
Cancer patients benefit from TAA	-	75/112 (67%)	-	102/153 (66,7%)
Teens benefit from TAA	-	61/112 (54,5%)	-	90/153 (58,9%)
Autistics benefit from TAA	-	73/112 (65,2%)	132/152 (86,9%)	113/153 (73,9%)
NPMD patients benefit from TAA	-	56/112 (50%)	96/152 (63,2%)	91/153 (59,5%)
Patients with psychiatric disorders benefit from TAA	-	54/112 (48,2%)	5/152 (3,3%)	76/153 (49,7%)
Depressants benefit from AAT	-	-	132/152 (86,9%)	-
Patients with ADHD benefit from TAA	-	-	87/152 (57,3%)	-
Patients with Anxiety Disorders benefit from TAA	-	-	99/152 (65,2%)	-
Patients with symptoms of stress benefit from AAT	-	-	96/152 (63,2%)	-

Caption: " -" this questioning was not applied to the interviewee.

DISCUSSION

According to the groups surveyed, 65.62% of the participants reported already knowing the AAT, being better known in the group of health professionals, among these 6.71% have already participated in some type of intervention. In terms of risk/benefit, TAA confers more benefits than risk according to 75.03% of the participants, with this consensus being greater among psychologists and physicians. A systematic review analysing 2059 articles showed that AAT confers several benefits, among them: therapeutic improvement in all age groups, especially in the biopsychosocial factor, having as a limiting factor the incorporation into the clinical routine and animal management. Improvement in social interaction and communication was observed in children with aggressive and hyperactive behaviour. For patients with disabilities, there is the promotion of functionality, improvement in independence and inclusion. As a harmful factor, access, care for the animal, technical preparation of the professional and regulatory issues in the law were considered. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Brazil has regulations, in terms of assisted intervention, exclusively in relation to the guide dog (Law nº 5.083, of 2016)[7].

In the public studied (men and women), 90.44% claim to have a good or excellent relationship with animals and 92.72% of these participants reported that they would accept to participate in AAT sessions. Among the health professionals, 86.09% informed that they would accept to submit their patients to AAT, in view of the benefits. Regarding the species considered viable for the application of this therapy, 92.63% of the participants believe that the dog would be the most suitable animal, followed by the Cat (66.84%) and the horse (55.66%). Dogs, in fact, are the most used animals today, mainly due to the characteristics of this animal that facilitate the application, such as the ability to be domesticated, ease of training and the very relationship between humans and dogs, which includes trust and loyalty[7]. The horse appears as the second most used animal in AAT, mainly as a physical rehabilitation strategy[7]. In Brazil, hippotherapy is well regulated (Law n. 12830-19) and there are bills aimed at implementation in the Unified Health System, such as PL 3446/19, which requires the SUS to offer the therapeutic resource when there is a medical prescription, considering that the modality is already recognized as an integrative practice by the Federal Council of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy[8,9].

According to health professionals, children (90.5%), followed by the elderly (87.1%) and autistic (73.6%) are the groups that most benefited from AAT. Among the psychologists interviewed, 86.9% believe in the improvements obtained through AAT in autistic patients. A survey based on interviews with parents of autistic children who adhere to AAT indicated that these participants obtained gains in aspects related to communication, interest in activities and social interaction[9].

Regarding elderly patients, the literature reveals that, especially those with vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease (AD), showed improvement in irritability, decreased aggression and anxiety[10]. A study carried out with 54 participants in a nursing home with residents diagnosed with unspecified dementia revealed that, among participants undergoing AAT, an improvement in depression was perceived[10]. Another study carried out with 50 AD patients showed significant improvements in depressive symptoms and cognitive performance after 6 months, with weekly AAT sessions[10]. Barak et al[11] performed a clinical trial with older adults diagnosed with schizophrenia alone that revealed significant improvement in conversational skill, instrumental social skills, social adequacy/education, and social engagement after 6 months of AAT[11]. An Italian study carried out in a nursing home for 6 weeks with 21 patients suffering from dementia, depression or psychotic disorders, showed an improvement in mood in patients who saw or established contact with animals[10]. In the present study, 89.22% of the surveyed public believed that AAT would positively influence patients' mood.

Just over half of the health professionals interviewed consider that AAT has positive effects when applied to cancer patients. A study carried out in Canada reported that the diagnosis and treatment of childhood cancer causes physical and emotional suffering to patients and increases the predisposition to the development of psychological disorders. In this context, the authors reported that the application of AAT pro-

vided improvements in the adaptation to the hospital environment, acceptance of invasive procedures, greater motivation, pain relief, among other aspects[12].

Although patients in Palliative Care are identified as beneficiaries of AAT according to less than 1% of the medical team, the literature, albeit to a limited extent, demonstrates that after sessions of animal-assisted activities, positive effects are obtained, such as relaxation, decreased perception of pain and relaxation of the environment. These results are very useful, since the main objective of palliative care is to promote quality of life, relief from suffering and treatment of pain for patients with serious, progressive, and terminal diseases[13,14].

Among the health professionals interviewed, 58.27% believe that AAT will produce positive effects in patients with neuropsychomotor disorders. A study carried out with patients with multiple sclerosis, through the application of hippotherapy, revealed significant improvements in fatigue spasticity, pain perception and balance. In addition, a significant improvement in the general perception of health and quality of life was noted. These results were obtained through the application of the MSQOL-54 test, which is specific to assess the quality of life of patients with multiple sclerosis[15].

According to psychologists, the groups of patients most benefited are those diagnosed with depression (86.9%) and anxiety (65.2%) and almost 50% of doctors and nurses believe that psychiatric patients can benefit from AAT. A bibliographic review showed that psychiatric patients who participated in the AAT had a decrease in stress and aggression, as well as an improvement in their depressive condition due to the relaxing and friendly moments provided by the interaction with the animals[16].

About physiological and clinical improvement, about 55.52% of the research participants reported believing in the benefits of AAT in these aspects. However, the literature is still incipient regarding this issue. There are limited studies that assess biomarkers, such as cortisol levels, and sometimes they have low statistical significance. However, some studies have shown improvement in heart and respiratory rate, which can be attributed to the relaxation provided by animal-assisted activity[17,18].

Integrative and Complementary Practices in Health (PICS) are therapeutic resources made available by the Unified Health System (SUS), primarily in Primary Care, which aim at preventing and recovering from diseases through listening, bonding and integration of the human being. with the environment and society, acting in an integrated way with the conventional model of care[20]. Therefore, TAA fits as an integrative practice that can be incorporated into the SUS through PICS, and in this sense there is already a bill that aims to implement the TAA in public hospitals (PL 4455/12)[21]. Thus, the implementation of AAT in public health brings benefits to patients and a potential increase in the system's resoluteness, acting in a complementary way to the promotion of health care[21].

CONCLUSION

Through this study, it was possible to verify that in the general population, men and women, the knowledge of Animal Assisted Therapy is still not widespread when compared to health professionals. TAA is a practice that promises promising results in the well-being of the patient, however, it is noted that there is a need to expand the application of this modality of therapy, as well as the dissemination of the benefits provided by it.

Another aspect revealed by the study shows that the affection for animals present in the public is a key point for the therapy to be incorporated, because even among those who initially did not have knowledge about AAT, after the brief contact provided by the research, great part of these people would accept to participate or offer this experience to their patients.

In addition, studies aimed at proving the physiological benefits to the patient are still incipient and have limitations regarding the number of participants and methodology

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