Companion Animals- by Mara M. Baun, PhD, FAAN

Animals are playing many therapeutic roles in the lives of humans. Many people have had animals as pets, especially when they were children, and fondly remember their relationships. Today, animals not only are highly valued in many homes, but they have also assumed therapeutic roles with humans.

At present, animals frequently are visitors in health care institutions. Many hospitals and nursing homes allow animals, particularly dogs, to visit patients/residents. These visitors can be “therapy dogs” who are unknown to the patients or in some hospitals the patients’ own dogs. Certified therapy dogs generally visit a number of patients who request them. The patients’ own dogs usually just visit their owners and are known as “companion animals”. Various studies have shown that humans respond more positively both physiologically and psychologically to dogs to which they are attached than to unknown dogs (Baun, Bergstrom, Langston, & Thoma et al., 1984; Schuelke, Trask, Wallace, Baun, Bergstrom, & McCabe, 1991/92).

It is not uncommon for nursing homes to have “resident” dogs, or other animals who wander freely among the residents. Besides dogs, the most common are cats, rabbits, small rodents, birds, and fish. Problem behaviors of persons with Alzheimer’s were measured for one week prior to and 4 weeks after the placement of a dog. Participants on the day shift exhibited significantly fewer problem behaviors across the entire four weeks after the dog was living on the unit (McCabe, Baun, Speich, & Agrawal, 2002).

In another study conducted in an Alzheimer’s unit, it was found that particularly during the sundown period when persons with Alzheimer’s can become very agitated, residents were much calmer when a therapy dog was present (Churchill, Safaoui, McCabe, & Baun, 1999). For example, one person with Alzheimer’s who was pacing in the hallway responded very positively when a resident dog took him by the sleeve and lead him back to his room.

Caged birds in the rooms of the elderly in rehabilitation have been shown to decrease depression. Residents reported that their grandchildren enjoyed coming to visit with them and stayed longer, and one resident said that her physician came in each morning and sang a song to the bird. Another resident who received a diagnosis of a terminal disease while at the institution said that she talked to the bird about it, and her depression level decreased (Jessen, Cardiello, & Baun, 1997).

Children seem to have special relationships with animals. Children having physical examinations in a pediatric clinic were much calmer and less stressed when a therapy dog was present in the examination room (Nagengast, Baun, Leibowitz, & Megel, 1997; Hansen, Messinger, Baun, & Megel, 1999). Likewise, children undergoing dental procedures in a dental office and who had a therapy dog present experienced less physiological arousal and behavioral distress during the procedures than those who did not have a therapy dog (Havener, Thaier, Gentes, Megel, & Baun, 2001).

In summary, animals, especially dogs, are very active in health care these days. In a variety of settings, they are having very positive effects. More research, however, needs to be done on the health benefits of companion animals.
References