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Cortical Connections

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The Role of Animal Assisted Therapy in Dementia Care

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Vision Statement

A world without
Alzheimer's disease.

Mission Statement

To eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

The Alzheimer's Association reports that as many as 5.2 million people in the United States are living with Alzheimer's disease. Each of these individuals and their families must deal with the prognosis of progressive cognitive decline, and inevitably there are emotional and interpersonal consequences to this stress.

Individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia are vulnerable to a number of risk factors that may lead to poor quality of life, including: loneliness, confusion, communication difficulties, depression, and anxiety. They frequently have limited outlets for social interaction, and in the cases of those in nursing homes or assisted living centers, may have limited opportunities for healthy touch or physical affection (Gammonley & Yates, 1991). Cognitive deficits are present in this population which may include deficits in: memory, language, judgment, reasoning, impulse control, orientation to reality, and executive functioning. These individuals are overlooked as candidates for traditional therapeutic services due to their severe cognitive impairment, communication difficulties, and the progressive nature of the disease. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has been suggested by prior research as a viable treatment option to promote quality of life by reducing stress and anxiety, providing orientation to the here and now, and increasing socialization and pleasurable activities. (Bernstein, Friedmann, & Malaspina, 2000).

The benefits of AAT can be summarized by considering the bio-psycho-social model, which hypothesizes that biological, psychological and social factors all play a significant role in human functioning in the context of disease or illness. Interestingly, AAT is thought to directly affect the biological component of stress. According to Odendaal (1999), stroking or petting an animal has an effect on physiological measures of anxiety, such as heart rate and blood pressure. Additionally, pet owners have lower blood pressure and triglyceride levels than non-pet owners (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Animals fulfill another important need for humans by providing psychological benefits, such as the opportunity for mastery experiences and a psychological feeling of safety to humans. Several studies report that in times of significant stress, such as when dealing with terminal illness, people see animals as imperative to improving their morale and supporting them through the illness. Respondents often reported that animals kept them distracted from worries, made them feel more safe, encouraged physical activity, made them laugh and feel needed (Ruckert, 1987). According to Hart (2000), animals "have the ability to inspire and motivate people to engage in

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*The Role of Animal Assisted
Therapy in Dementia Care*

Chapter Caregiver Services: Information & Referral, 24/7 Helpline, Quarterly Caregiver Newsletter, Support Groups, Education & Training, Marie F. Poyner Respite Care Program, and MedicAlert+Safe Return Program. Call the Chapter office at (757) 459-2405 or (800) 272-3900 or check out the Chapter's website www.alz.org/seva for more information.

constructive activities that they would not have otherwise". Pet and therapy animals can motivate people to do such activities as getting out of bed to feed the animal or take the animal for a walk. A study by Benson (2002) reports that social support from animals can be as effective, or in some cases more effective, than social support from a close friend or spouse in lowering stress. In addition to serving as the source of social support, pets can facilitate socialization with other humans. Fick (1993) reports that the presence of pets in nursing homes increases both social and verbal interactions with other humans. Twice the number of verbal and non-verbal person to person interactions occurred during the dog present condition of their study than without the pet dog.

AAT is a unique therapy model that is being used with increasing frequency in nursing homes and assisted living settings. Research in this area is limited, but shows promise; in that Animal Assisted Therapy may increase the quality of life of many individuals afflicted with neurological disease, including Alzheimer's disease and related dementia. If you are interested in learning more about this therapy module, visit www.deltasociety.org for a wealth of information and resources. Beyond the formal application of AAT within residential facilities the quality of life is improved by living with animals and taking care of pets. If part of healthy living and aging is keeping one's brain fit by exercise, diet, engaging in mentally challenging activities and socialization, then a part of that socialization can be enhanced by taking care of an animal that reciprocally provides unconditional love in return. It is the connectedness that we feel which brings greater reassurance and reduction of anxiety and stress of our immediate circumstance such as living with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia. Physicians and other healthcare providers may wish to encourage this alternative therapeutic model for their patients to help support and increase their quality of life.

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