

SHORT REPORT

Questionnaire on animal-assisted therapy (AAT): The expectation for AAT as a day-care program for Japanese schizophrenic patients

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Abstract

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) was developed to promote human social and emotional functioning as a day-care program for psychiatric patients. In this study, we determined which animals 481 schizophrenic patients liked and what they thought about AAT, using an original questionnaire. It was found that more than 80% of the present patients liked animals and that they thought contact with animals was useful as a novel therapy. They had much interest in, and many hopes, for AAT.

Key Words: AAT, schizophrenia

Introduction

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has been used as a therapeutic tool for various psychiatric patients, and developed to promote human physical, social, emotional and cognitive functioning, in Europe and America [1,2]. To improve these functions in psychiatric patients, AAT, as an occupational therapy, requires trained animals. There have been few studies on the clinical practice of AAT for schizophrenic patients, or research to determine which AAT mechanism is effective for schizophrenia in Japanese patients.

Schizophrenia is one of the disorders in which an unfavorable outcome is associated with emotional withdrawal and a deficit in social functioning. In this study, we determined which animals Japanese schizophrenic patients liked and what they thought about AAT. We used our original questionnaire for the patients in order to build an AAT program that followed the European and American systems.

Method

Original questionnaire

A total of 481 schizophrenic in- and outpatients, diagnosed according to the ICD-10 criteria, in five psychiatric hospitals in Kanagawa, Kagawa and Tokushima prefectures in Japan were studied. The

subjects were 481 patients (273 male, 208 female; 170 out- and 311 inpatients), aged 14–80 years old (average, 51.2 ± 12.1); diagnosis was F2 (schizophrenia, ICD-10; care periods, under 1 year, 74 (15.8%); 1–3 years, 52 (11.1%); 3–5 years, 40 (8.5%); 5–10 years 76 (16.2%); and over 10 years, 239 (48.3%). We determined their favorite animals and impression of hopes for AAT using a questionnaire, after obtaining informed consent. The questionnaire was carried out in September to October 2001. The data were assessed using the χ^2 -test ($df=1$).

Results

The answers to the questionnaire are presented in Table I 404 (85.2%) of the 481 patients had experience in keeping animals.

A total of 397 patients (82.7%) said they “like animals”, and that their favorite animals were dogs (312 patients), cats (206), birds (150), horses (86), and dolphins (51). On the other hand, disliked animals mentioned were cats (113 people), dogs (86), horses (62), birds (58), and dolphins (51). Other favorite animals were rabbits, hamsters and goldfish, while other disliked animals were snakes, which many patients said they disliked.

Of the patients, 273 (57.6%) said that they wanted contact with animals, and 236 (49.7%, “No idea” not included) thought that contact with animals was

Table I. Patients' answers to the main questions.

Question	Yes	No idea	No	No response
Have you kept animals?	404 (85.2%)		70 (14.8%)	7
Do you like animals?	397 (82.7%)		83 (17.3%)	1
Do you want to enjoy contact with animals for a change?	273 (57.6%)		201 (42.4%)	7
Do you think the contact with animals is useful as a therapy?	236 (49.7%)	157 (33.1%)	82 (17.2%)	6
Do you not mind my favorite animal coming into the hospital?	216 (46.4%)		250 (53.6%)	15
Do you like well-trained animals better?	316 (69.1%)		141 (30.9%)	24
Do you feel sorry if an animal is used for treatment?	169 (35.6%)	127 (26.7%)	179 (37.7%)	6
Do you know a pet-type robot AIBO?	191 (40.2%)		284 (59.8%)	6
Do you think that AIBO is useful for therapy?	196 (41.8%)	157 (33.5%)	116 (24.7%)	12

useful as a therapy for a change. A total of 250 patients (53.6%) did not mind if their favorite animals came into the hospital, while 216 (46.4%) did mind; 316 patients (69.1%) liked well-trained animals better, and 141 (30.9%) liked animals with a wild and unrestrained character. A total of 169 patients (36.5%) said they would feel sorry if animals were used as tools for therapy, while 179 (37.7%) said "No problem", and 127 (26.7%) said "I don't know".

One hundred and ninety-one patients (40.2%) knew the pet-type robot AIBO, and 196 people (41.8%) thought that an AIBO was useful for a change.

Discussion

As a result of the questionnaire, it was found that more than 80% of the present psychiatric patients liked animals and that they thought contact with animals was useful as a therapy for a change. They had much interest in, and many hopes for AAT. However, 83 (about 20%) patients did not like animals, and thus it may be difficult for them to undergo AAT as a psychiatric therapy; 35.6% of patients felt sorry if an animal was being used for treatment but, on the other hand, 57.6% of patients wanted to enjoy contact with animals. Thus, many patients "like animals", and it is possible that they may treat animals carefully during treatment.

On the other hand, outpatients tended to want contact with animals ($P=0.02$) and thought that AAT was useful for their therapy ($P=0.01$) significantly more than the inpatients. In particular, there were significant differences in the tendencies to dislike animals ($P=0.03$) and to mind animals coming into the hospital ($P<0.01$) between the schizophrenic patients and the non-schizophrenic ones (mood disorders, neurosis, etc.). The schizophrenic patients tended to dislike animals and mind animals coming into the hospital.

Mysophobia (very afraid of dirt) and zoonosis (anxious about infection) were the reasons why the patients minded animals coming into the hospital [3]. It is known that zoonosis involves over 200 kinds of pathogens, for example, bacteria, fungi, viruses,

protozoa, Rickettsia and Chlamydia. However, it is possible to prevent such infection through treatment of the animals by veterinarians. We thus have to think about how to approach animal phobia patients in the future. Unlike real animals, a pet-type robot does not involve the risk of bacterial infection. Therefore, the AIBO may be useful in elderly long-term care facilities for elderly psychiatric patients. Further study is needed.

It is important, as the first step, for patients who like animals, that AAT begins with well-trained and well-treated animals which they have indicated to be their favorites. Also, it is necessary to take good care of the animals in order to avoid stressful conditions.

Based on this questionnaire survey, doctors, nurses and students in Azabu University and JAHA (Japanese Animal Hospital Association), will begin therapy with AAT (light contact with a dog).

It has been reported that AAT might be associated with reductions in fear and anxiety [4]. Actually, it has been reported that Version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS) at termination showed improvement compared with baseline scores before AAT in psychiatric patients [5]. Successful examples of AAT in the improvement in domestic activity and negative schizophrenic symptoms have been reported in Hungary and Israel [6,7]. It is reported that AAT seems to be helpful in the rehabilitation of schizophrenic patients and that it may improve anhedonia. More practice is necessary in Japan.

Conclusion

There are few hospitals in which AAT is performed as a psychiatric therapy in Japan. In this study, it was shown that many psychiatric patients who like animals, do not mind animals coming into the hospital, and think AAT may be useful as a therapy for a change. It is also necessary to take good care of the animals in order to avoid stressful conditions, and to prevent any infection between patients and animals. We conclude that it is necessary to establish AAT as a psychiatric therapy suitable for the Japanese culture, as it is in other countries where it is much more advanced.

Key points

- Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a program for psychiatric daycare therapy
- AAT has been well studied in Europe and America, but has not yet been much developed in Japan
- We did questionnaire survey of what kind of animal was suitable for treatment of psychiatric patients and have developed a Japanese AAT
- Japanese patients liked dogs and horses and understood that they were to receive AAT as treatment
- We want to develop the AAT program which has proved suitable for Japanese patients

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Statement of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest with any commercial or other associations in connection with the submitted article.

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