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Effectiveness of a dog-assisted therapy programme to enhance quality of life in institutionalized dementia patients

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Background & Aim: In recent years, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has been the subject of a number of studies to determine its effectiveness in treating aspects of dementia such as psychobehavioural, relational and/or cognitive disorders. However, there remains a significant shortfall in knowledge about the impact of these therapies on patients' quality of life or their effect on the use of psychotropic medication. The aim of this study was to assess the effectiveness of a dog-assisted therapy with regard to the use of psychotropic medication and quality of life in persons with dementia institutionalized in a public care home.

Methods: A dog-assisted therapy intervention was designed, in which 34 residents of a public residential aged care facility in Cuenca (Spain) participated. The participants were assigned to two groups, one experimental group and one control group. The programme consisted of one weekly 50-minute session during nine months. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare post training values between groups, using baseline values as covariates.

Results: Pre- and post-intervention measures of various physical and psychological variables were obtained. Although we found no significant differences in any of the groups, we did find enhancements in quality of life in both, intervention and control group, but no improvements in relation to the use of psychotropic medication.

Conclusion: Animal-assisted therapies may enhance quality of life in dementia patients in aged care homes, but it is not a substitute of the pharmacological treatment.

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