

Observable Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy Using Dogs. Hjaltadóttir, I., Pétursdóttir, A. B., Saemundsdóttir, G., Vikingsdóttir, G. L., Atladóttir, I. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 15 Supplement.2, 2003: 283-4.

Objective: The aim of this study was to observe and evaluate the effects of animal-assisted therapy using dogs for the wellbeing of demented patients. *Design:* This is a qualitative study using the method of hermeneutic phenomenology as described by Max van Manen (1990). *Materials and Methods:* The participants were seven demented patients in two rehabilitation wards in the Landspítali University Hospital in Iceland. Once a week a dog with his owner would visit each ward for 30-60 minutes each the. Participant observation was undertaken to take note of the interaction between dog, patients, and the immediate surroundings. Focus groups of staff in both wards were formed and a relative of each patient was interviewed as well. Observations were documented and interviews and discussions in focus groups audiotaped and transcribed to generate text for interpretive analysis. The text was interpreted according to hermeneutic phenomenology as described by Max van Manen (1990). *Results:* Four main themes emerged from the text, each consisting of several sub themes. The main themes were: a) Awakening of feelings, b) Connecting to others, c) Remembering, and d) Focus of attention. The interaction with the dogs stimulated the patients' emotional response, characterized by signs of happiness, such as smiling, as well as encouraging them to communicate in words and by touch. The patients seemed to grow accustomed to the presence of the dogs that rekindled memories of dogs or animals they had known long ago. Every time a dog would visit the ward something interesting seemed to be happening and as every one's attention would be directed toward the dog. Certain calmness could be felt in the ward. *Conclusion:* The findings of this research indicate that animal-assisted therapy using dogs was beneficial to the patients. Animal-assisted therapy is therefore an important choice that should be available to demented elderly patients or nursing home residents.

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