

Canine Assistant Teacher's for Student Nurses Wellbeing

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Students are faced with many stressors within their academic life & this situation is made harder due to the fact that they may be separated from their known & familiar support networks. Students today are also impacted by additional stress through escalating loan debt and uncertain post-graduation job security. Middlesex University has pioneered a new initiative by using dogs as a form of therapy and a strategy to improve positive student experience. Providing them with an opportunity to interact with these canine assistant teachers helps to combat these problems. The Nursing Skills Department in collaboration with a Child Health lecturer is using canine assistant teachers with the nursing student's.

The utilisation of animals for the benefit of human companionship is not a new concept and has been recognised in varied formats for many years. Educationalist John Lock stated the importance of small animals for children to develop responsibility & "tender feelings" [1]. Within the field of mental health Quaker William Tuke of the York retreat (UK) exposed patients to & utilised small domesticated animals to provide pleasure & to awaken "social & benevolent feelings" [2]. It was from here that mental health institutions then started to develop this provision further both in their range of animals utilised and the engagement used with patients. Even nursing's own pioneer Florence Nightingale stated in her Notes on nursing (1880) that the uses of small animals are often an excellent companion for the sick & especially for long chronic cases. Florence Nightingale also put this notion into practice during the Bore war when her ward housed her own pet owl "Athena" for the pleasure & positive effect on her patients. The use of animals has grown vastly and has been adapted within a variety of sectors since.

The Canine Assistant Teachers initiative will be providing interventions and relaxation strategies for the students within the classroom/clinical labs setting, as well as pre-exam environments. A risk assessment was undertaken and training is performed by certified trainer. A full Health and Safety assessment within the University was undertaken to ensure they have a designated facilities to rest and an area so when the dog is not working it can play. The dog by law is required to be licensed, chipped and has full third party insurance by the owner and also required to be covered under the University public indemnity and liability policy. To allow the Canine teaching assistants to be recognised within the University grounds we have designed a uniform in the form of a highly visible coat and issued a University staff ID.

Signs are posted around the University grounds informing students/staff that the CATs are working within the area and students are advised before the dog enters the classroom allowing them there right to express any concerns they may have (fear of animals, in particular dogs, allergies or general dislike of animals) so far no dog has been refused entry into the classroom on the contrary what we have seen is that students who have expressed a fear have chosen to attend the class but sit away from the dog.

This initiative is different to therapy pets as they can only be used by a single handler whereas canine assistant teachers are socialised, and

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provide educational outcomes and trained to work across a team of handlers. Therapy pets also do not have an identified target or goal and taken in to hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and schools to provide comfort and distraction. Canine assistant teachers on the other hand have targets and also help reduce stress for better educational outcomes. Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) would recognise our dogs as Animal-assisted activities providers (AAA).

Contact with any animal has a physiological response on a person naturally. Research undertaken by Friedmann et al. [3] identified that when people talk to other people generally their blood pressure increases, however when they speak to animals their blood pressure typically decreases & in many cases lower than the levels recorded when the person was quietly resting. Animals also decrease a person's heart rate & invoke a calming effect [4,5,6]. There have also been positive effects & outcomes for reduction of respiratory rates, temperature control & pain reduction & improved general health status [7,8].

Physical health & mental health are closely linked & connected & therefore animals also have been found to have positive effects impacts on emotional & mental health states. This therefore has a big implications for students, as they may be away from home for the time & geographical distances can be small (local, national) or vast (international) causing home sickness, feelings of loneliness, disconnection, isolation & displacement. Course requirements can result in students having heightened levels of stress, anxiety & arousal, as well as changes & fluctuation of mood states. It is due to these effects that in recent years there has been an increase in students having mental health complications & also a rise in suicides.

It is for these reasons that research has been undertaken within this field in regard to animals. Results have found that animal interactions can reduce despair, anxiety, stress levels & depression [9]. It has also been found that animals can "indirectly make individuals feels better

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by making strange settings or unfamiliar people seem less threatening" [6]. Humans have an innate & basic need to feel connected both physically & emotionally. A good way to demonstrate connection is through affection and touch & animals afford humans this opportunity by "fulfilling a person's fundamental need for touch in an uncomplicated way" [10], they also provide love & affection in an unbiased, unconditional & impartial way. Animals allow for a shared interaction on an equal footing where love & connection is a two process & it is this reciprocity which makes animal encounters not only a valuable one but also a healing, supportive, encouraging & pleasurable one. Mental health is a very serious issue nationwide in higher education. An increasing number of students, as many as 140 a year, are taking their own lives because they are unable to cope with the pressures of university, according to a study of suicides in higher education [11].

Richard Louv, 2008 [12] identified a phenomena which he coined as "Nature deficit disorder" where he said that the reduction in interaction with nature has impacts for physical & emotional health, including raised incidences of obesity, depression & behavioural disorders. Research posits & supports intentional interaction & engagements with nature/animals as being able to increase student's mental health and well-being through mitigation of some of their experienced stress. Kellert et al. [13], Bjick [14] found a strong correlation between educational level & personal attitude towards animals: he found that the higher the academic level achieved, there was a more positive view of animals. It therefore stands to reason that if animals can reduce stress & have positive effects on human physiological, psychological, emotional health & well-being & those in higher education have a propensity to an animal affiliation then the provision of animal encounters & activity to support both personal well-being & academic achievement is time & effort well spent.

To ensure that we are following the Working Dogs and The Animal Welfare Act 2006 [15]; all the dogs being used in this program are individually selected, have undertaken a temperament assessment by an recognised independent assessor, are fully vaccinated and have undertaken a health check prior to registration with the University and have designated on-call vet to continually ensure their wellbeing.

Through this initiative, we aim to support students into transforming their potential into success. Our mission is to create experiences allowing students life changing opportunities to achieve their best possible outcomes. Moving forward our aim is to develop the canine assistant team into a more dynamic service provision through the expansion and use of a range of animal within a Human Animal Bond centre (HAB), where service provision would be able to cater to individual student's needs and animal preferences through a range of identified programmes and initiatives within the university. Further expansion could lead to the possibility of a Well Being Centre for both student and staff offering a variety of complementary therapies for stress reduction and general wellbeing, possibilities include acupuncture, massage and Kinesiology. We will be evaluating the effectiveness of this initiative in the future.

Theoretical Conceptualisations

At this current time there is no unified, widely accepted or empirically supported & agreed theoretical framework which explains why & how the human / animal bond produces potentially therapeutic outcomes. However the literature proffers three common theories for these occurrences:

Biophilia hypothesis

This theory is linked to the reduction of anxiety & arousal levels mostly. The hypothesis was created by Wilson [16] where he identified humans as having a genetically based attraction to & need to attend to other living organisms [17]. The hypothesis's fundamental foundation is that our evolutionary history has human relationships shifting & changing through time, from becoming the hunted where man was required to pay attention to & understand environmental / animal cues as part of survival to the shifting power of being the hunter & animal / human relationships becoming more of a partnership in relation to work, friendship & companions with parameters of respect & care. Wilson's work has been utilised to form the basis of a relatively new hypothesis & comes from the "Green Revolution" [4], where it is defined as "society trying to re-establish links with nature, including animals".

Social mediation/social support theory

This has similarities to attachment theory. The social theory basis links to the innate need of humans to forge relationships so that they maintain their personal psychological well-being. It is through social connections & companionship that individuals achieve feelings of connectedness & purpose. It is this connection that allows us to identify one's self-identity while also providing us stimulation, opportunities to give & receive affection & achieve external validation [4,18]. Animals have termed as social lubricants due to the fact that they increase incidents of social interactions between both strangers & known people

Attachment theory

Bowlby's well known attachment theory highlights the bond between mother & baby through a biological function that is grounded in protection & security. For adults attachment is a flexible & sometimes transient function where people may be required to bond & build attachment relationships with a network (sometimes complex networks) of others. Animals are able offer closeness, stability & reciprocity in a constant & non-judgemental manner through their presence & instant responsive behaviours. Animals may be found to be a bridge between human relationship formations or in cases of absence may be found to be a substitute for human attachment [4,18,19].

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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