

Animal assisted or pet engagement in dementia care



Background

Interacting with animals has many benefits for older people. It can have a positive impact on physical, social, emotional, motivational and cognitive functioning, while helping reduce mood disorders such as anxiety and depression. Animal assisted or pet engagement aims to provide pleasure and relaxation.

Benefits of engaging with pets

Engaging with animals and pets can help people living with dementia to:

- Express their emotions.
- Interact with the animal in a meaningful way.
- Feel validated and have a sense of purpose in caring for the animal.
- Reminisce on pets they owned, stimulating long and short-term memory.
- Enjoy a sense of comfort and security via a tactile and sensory experience.
- Engage in positive social behaviour like smiling, laughing, and eye contact.

Interacting with animals can be effective as an alternative to medication for a person with changed behaviour as a result of dementia, helping to counteract:

- Social withdrawal, apathy and restlessness.
- Aggressive behaviour, vocalising, pacing and intrusion.

- Reduced communication skills.
- Long and or short-term memory deficits.
- Disorientation towards time as well as place.

Who is most likely to benefit?

Engaging with animals and pets is most likely to benefit those who have:

- Previously enjoyed looking after domestic pets or being around animals.
- Early stages of dementia who may enjoy walking, stroking or brushing the pets.
- No known allergies to pets.
- Some vision and/or hearing and in need of tactile stimulation.
- No history of abuse toward animals.

Guidelines

- Use accredited pet engagement programs, such as [Delta Society Australia](#), that provide trained and police-checked animal handlers with pets who have passed the requirements for sociability and cooperation.
- Visiting handlers are responsible for the care of the pet and the safety of the staff and residents during their visits.
- The animal handler will introduce the animal to the person with dementia and will monitor and report responses to the activity to care staff for evaluation purposes. If the handler identifies a stress response from the animal or individual, separate them to avoid potential for aggression from the animal.
- Make sure that the pet program you use has adequate insurance cover for public indemnity and liability.
- Ensure the animal handler understands and complies with care home protocols, policies and procedures.

Infection Control

- Provide hand-wipe cleansers or antiseptic hand rub to ensure that staff and residents are able to wash their hands before and after handling animals.
- Provide appropriate care and toileting facilities for animals such as drinking bowls, “pooper scoopers”, cat litter trays or disposable lining paper for bird cages.
- Public health regulations stipulate animals are not permitted within food preparation areas, near or on dining tables, nor within clean areas used for wound dressings.

Special considerations and precautions

Infections that pass between animals and humans are known as Zoonoses. Animal visits should be discouraged where people are infected by tuberculosis, salmonella, campylobacter, shigella, streptococcus group A, MRSA, ringworm, giardia and ameobiasis.

Risk management

Engaging with animals and pets should be implemented only after considerable advance planning and evaluation procedures are established. A written policy or protocol is needed. To minimise risk of harm or injury related to pets, animal-assisted activities protocol should consider the following:

- Pets for residential facilities should be purchased from reputable breeders or animal welfare shelters such as the RSPCA.
- The pet should be assessed for suitable attractiveness, personality, temperament and training prior to interacting with residents. For example, the RSPCA recommends the adoption of dogs over 7 years old for older people, as they have been socialised and are less energetic than younger dogs.
- Responsibility for the care of the residential pet should be allocated to designated permanent staff members who can monitor the needs of the animal and document care performance daily in a pet register.
- Documentation of the registration, veterinary schedule for immunisation, worming, feeding program, housing of pet, pet hygiene and any special care needs of the animal should be kept up to date.

Care Staff Helpsheet

- The pet should be fed, have a fresh supply of water, be exercised, bathed and treated against fleas and worms regularly as per veterinary advice.
- The pet must be confined to an agreed designated area and not permitted to stray.
- The pet should not be subject to abuse or neglect by residents and staff.
- To prevent conflict, rules should be in place for residents and visiting pets, such as whether the animal needs to be kept on a leash for the duration of the visit, or in separate areas within the facility, or muzzled.

Useful Resources

Anthrozoology Research Group provides access to multidisciplinary research into human animal interaction.

RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) provides the location of animal adoption sites and animal shelters.

Animals Australia Inc. is a national not-for-profit animal protection agency that investigates and exposes animal cruelty.

This resource material is informed by literature and associate practice evidence. This guidance should be applied within your organisations policies and procedures.