



## Introduction and Aim

The standard definition of Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) is: "AAA provides opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits to enhance quality of life. AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by specially trained professionals, paraprofessionals, and/or volunteers, in association with animals that meet specific criteria."<sup>1</sup> A study by Kendziorak et al<sup>2</sup> concluded that older adults derive physical, psychological, and social health benefits from animal-assisted therapy. Elderly residing in long-term care facilities experience lesser socialization and nurturing relationships than they have at home. Hence, it was hoped that by introducing pets into the nursing home, social interactions and sensory stimulation can be fostered and enhanced.

The aim of this study was to explore the older persons' perception on animal assisted activities in a nursing home.

## Materials and Methods

This was a qualitative study. Seven nursing home residents with intact cognition and communication ability were studied. The participants of this study came from a nursing home (NH). St Joseph's Home was established in 1978 by the Catholic Welfare Services (CWS) to provide shelter, care and love for the aged and destitute, regardless of race or religion. The NH had two resident birds residing in the garden, where the NH residents can watch and feed them. Two dogs were brought in by a group of NH volunteers to the NH once a month for about two hours per session for the residents to interact with them.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the NH residents, to examine the effects of resident pets on their lives and the residents were encouraged to share meaningful experiences with the pets. The list of questions that were asked determines their past experiences with their pets. The following demographic data were also obtained: age, gender, race, religion, marital status, and education level. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed by the interviewer. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis by three researchers. Major themes were then formed by the researchers at a meeting dedicated to this study.

## Results

AAA is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, or cognitive function.<sup>2</sup> This may not be true for all individuals, however, it is important to note that AAA are basically the natural pet visitation of elderly people in a long-term care facility. The study found the following results:

Table 1 shows the distribution of demographics and characteristics of the participants. Majority were male (71%) and Chinese (72%).

Table 1: Demographic and Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics		Participants, N=7 n (%)
Gender	Male	5 (71)
	Female	2 (29)
Race	Chinese	5 (72)
	Indian	1 (14)
	Eurasian	2 (14)
Marital status	Single	4 (57)
	Married	3 (43)
Education Level	Primary	3 (43)
	Secondary	3 (43)
	No Education	1 (14)

Four themes that emerged from the analysis were: (i) reminiscence, (ii) triggering emotions, (iii) preferences, and (iv) environment.

### Reminiscence

The participants felt that the animals in the NH helped them to experience positive emotion and can even promote psychological effect. The following were the representative statements:

"When I was young and living in the kampong (village), I love to catch and play with the birds."

"Previously I had kept fish just to play with them... goldfish... when I was young."

"In my old house, [my] brother caught two birds and I helped him to feed them. Brother loves birds and birds are easy to keep and maintain. It is not expensive to keep them and there is no training needed."

## Results (Cont'd)

### Triggering emotions

The subjects shared feelings of sympathy, a sense of well-being, and companionship. The following responses were gathered:

"I feel sorry for the birds as they cannot fly out [of the cage]."

"I kept dogs and cats as they were strays, left by families who had shifted out. I took pity on them."

"It helps me to exercise and I feel much healthier and more confident."

"Birds and dogs - I like them and played with them. I touched them. I fed them. I like the two big birds. I whistled to them".



### Preferences

"I prefer dogs to birds. Dogs can recognise people and alert us."

"... Small dogs are very cute and more beautiful in its behaviour and bigger dogs tend to be fierce. When touching them, they may respond by barking."

"I prefer dogs. Dogs follow me around."

"I like the two birds most as they can respond."

### Environment

"It is cleaner now as birds are kept in the cage and droppings are contained. Previously, whenever birds flew around the place, there were droppings on the ground".

I don't like dogs and cats around this home as their faeces are very smelly."



Most of the participants expressed positive feelings towards their engagement in AAA and this implied that regular socialization from AAA could potentially improve the quality of life in the elderly residents.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Many reports described participants' positive feelings towards animals. In this study, we described the older persons' perception on AAA in a nursing home. The participants felt that AAA could promote positive emotions such as youthfulness, reminiscence and peacefulness. Similarly, a study by E. Paul Cherniack et al suggested the potential benefits of animals on the physical and psychological health in humans.<sup>4</sup>

Participants also expressed that preferences such as size of an animal, its physical looks, and its ability to respond to humans play a role in determining the residents' acceptance towards AAA.

However, the potential influence of demographic characteristics of participants (e.g., education, ethnicity, and income) on the participants' acceptance for AAA remains uncertain.

In conclusion, AAA is a feasible way to improve social health of older persons, thus enhancing their quality of life.

## References

- Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Activities and Therapy. <http://www.aai-int.org/aai/standards-of-practice/>.
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- Budahn, Nichole M., "Effectiveness of Animal-Assisted Therapy: Therapists' Perspectives" (2013). Master of Social Work Clinical Research Papers. Paper 159.
- E. Paul Cherniack<sup>1,2</sup> and Ariella R. Cherniack<sup>3</sup> The Benefit of Pets and Animal-Assisted Therapy to the Health of Older Individuals; Hindawi Publishing Corporation Current.