

Understanding the role of therapy dogs in human health promotion

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SUMMARY

Introducing dogs in therapy to support improvements in human health is a growing practice, and although there is scientific evidence which shows the benefits for human wellbeing there is less research into the impact on dog welfare. This study addresses the welfare of therapy dogs (excluding regulated assistance animals such as guide dogs) across a variety of settings including hospitals, age care and mental health services and assesses the impact of a range of human - animal interactions on dog welfare.

The study considers the One Welfare framework as a key factor for it's future sustainability. In doing so it has identified a range of concerns due to the lack of guidelines and standards to protect therapy dogs' welfare in Australia (with a similar position in other countries). In particular, it highlights the ethical challenge posed by dogs' participation in therapy roles which seek to achieve human health goals without the dog having autonomy to choose or reject its role leading to potential exploitation. As such, there is a risk that dogs may be viewed solely as tools to provide emotional or therapeutic support rather than as sentient individuals with their own needs and desires. This could lead to the neglect of the dog's welfare, for example by ignoring signs of stress or overworking the dog.

The study highlights the internationally recognised Ottawa Charter which emphasizes that health is not just the absence of disease, but a resource that enables people to live fulfilling lives and which recognizes that caring relationships, including those with animals, can contribute to overall well being. However, the charter does not explicitly recognise the welfare of animals, and the study concludes that an extension of the Charter to include therapy animals adopting a One Welfare approach would promote animal and human health and welfare beyond current boundaries.

Case study impacts

- Improvements in recognition of the need to address welfare of therapy dogs in human - animal interactions across various environments would bring benefits for human and animal welfare outcomes.



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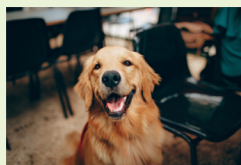
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One Welfare Pillars

ANIMAL WELFARE



- Raising awareness of the potential exploitation of therapy dogs in human-animal interactions and addressing this risk would improve animal welfare
- There is a risk that dogs may be viewed solely as tools leading to dogs' sentience being overlooked
- Ignoring signs of stress or overworking therapy dogs can compromise their welfare

HUMAN WELLBEING



- Addressing potential issues affecting the welfare of therapy dogs when carrying out their tasks, could bring benefits to human wellbeing.

ENVIRONMENT



Physical

- Adapting guidance and standards each work setting for therapy dogs is key to improve their welfare

Social environment

- Considering the welfare of dogs can lead to better quality of human-animal relationships
- Raising public awareness

Multidisciplinary relevant areas

Animal Welfare professionals, Animal Behaviour professionals, Regulatory bodies, Social/Therapy workers

References / Source

- McDowall, S., Hazel, S. J., Cobb, M., & Hamilton-Bruce, A. (2023). Understanding the Role of Therapy Dogs in Human Health Promotion. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(10), 5801. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105801>

