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Article

Methodological Considerations in Designing and Evaluating Animal-Assisted InterventionsCindy Stern ¹ and Anna Chur-Hansen ^{2,*} ¹ The Joanna Briggs Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia² Discipline of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia

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Simple Summary: There is a growing literature on the benefits of companion animals to human mental and physical health. Despite the literature base, these benefits are not well understood, because of flawed methodologies. This paper draws upon four systematic reviews, focusing exclusively on the use of canine-assisted interventions for older people residing in long-term care. Two guides are offered for researchers, one for qualitative research, one for quantitative studies, in order to improve the empirical basis of knowledge. Research in the area of the human-animal bond and the potential benefits that derive from it can be better promoted with the use of uniform and rigorous methodological approaches.

Abstract: This paper presents a discussion of the literature on animal-assisted interventions and describes limitations surrounding current methodological quality. Benefits to human physical, psychological and social health cannot be empirically confirmed due to the methodological limitations of the existing body of research, and comparisons cannot validly be made across different studies. Without a solid research base animal-assisted interventions will not receive recognition and acceptance as a credible alternative health care treatment. The paper draws on the work of four systematic reviews conducted over April–May 2009, with no date restrictions, focusing exclusively on the use of canine-assisted interventions for older people residing in long-term care. The reviews revealed a lack of good quality studies. Although the literature base has grown in volume since its inception, it predominantly consists of anecdotal accounts and reports. Experimental studies undertaken are often flawed in aspects of design, conduct and reporting. There are few qualitative studies available leading to the inability to draw definitive conclusions. It is clear that due to the complexities associated with these interventions not all weaknesses can be eliminated. However, there are basic methodological weaknesses that can be addressed in future studies in the area. Checklists for quantitative and qualitative research designs to guide future research are offered to help address methodological rigour.

Keywords: animal-assisted interventions; evidence based practice; qualitative; quantitative; methodology

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