Dog Days Are Coming: Pet Therapy for Nurses
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Background
Pet therapy is known as an alternative form of therapy, which can provide comfort, entertainment, distraction, and emotional support. Pet therapy can improve mood in patients, hospital staff, and especially in nurses. Traditionally, therapy dogs visit patients throughout the hospital, however, in the NICCU, the newborns and infants are too young to enjoy the benefits of pet therapy. However, nurses can greatly benefit from pet therapy, and report feelings of “happiness”, “decreased stress” and the enjoyment of seeing the animal upon their visits. Pet therapy is a cost-free resource within the hospital that is provided by volunteers and can help the nurses in a variety of different ways.

Objectives
To assess the effect of pet therapy animals on NICCU nurses and specifically measure, mood, stress level and job satisfaction after having an interaction with a pet.

Methodology
• The effect of therapy pets was measured by surveying NICCU nurses on their interactions with the CHLA therapy dogs.
• Survey questions were measurable and aimed to determine if therapy dogs improve mood, improve the work environment, decrease stress, etc.
• The survey consisted of 5 questions and utilized a Likert Scale to measure the responses received
• Surveys were distributed online by Survey Monkey and physical paper copies were available to the staff on unit for 2 weeks
• Participation in the survey was mentioned to the nurses in AM and PM huddles
• Participation in the survey was voluntary
• Utilized scholarly databases such as EBSCO, PUBMED, CINAHL to find peer reviewed articles
• Search terms included “Stress in the ICU”, “Pet Therapy”, “Alternative Therapy”, “Work Environment Stress”, etc.

Results

Future Goals
• Educate the staff on the existing pet therapy program available at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and the potential benefits from their visits.
• Have more frequent visits in the NICCU.
• Have pet therapy visits available to the night shift.

Recommendations
Based on our findings, we recommend more frequent visits from the pet therapy program for NICCU nurses, as well as that the pet therapy program accommodate the night shift staff during early evening hours. Additionally, we recommend utilizing the pet therapy program during particularly stressful and emotional times and in concurrence with other employee support services. We hope to extend these recommendations to other nurses within the hospital.

Challenges
• Risk for transmitting diseases from pets to patients and vice-versa. CHLA Policy CC – 75.0 states that pet owners bringing their pet onto the unit must ensure that the animals are up to date on their vaccinations and mandates hand hygiene for those wanting to play with the pet therapy animal.
• Putting staff and patients at potential risk of exacerbating allergies. CHLA Policy CC – 75.0 also addresses this concern.
• Perhaps the spontaneous visits by the pet therapy animals. Having regular days and nights in which the animals visit could help the nurses better prepare and schedule some time away from their busy shift to visit with the animals.

Based on our literature review, we found that the presence of pet therapy animals on hospital floors reduce stress levels, as indicated by a reduction in heart rate, lowered blood pressure, and decreased cortisol level. Additionally, pet therapy has proven to improve overall mood and morale, and improve physical and cognitive functioning.

Both the animal and handler in therapy programs are trained, evaluated, registered and strictly regulated. Therapy animals are trained not to lick or scratch and are up-to-date on their vaccinations.

References