A Clinical Practice Change Initiative to Incorporate Animal Assisted Therapy in Advanced Practice Registered Nurses’ Clinical Practice for Children and Adolescents

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Abstract

Background: Children and adolescents mental healthcare needs is vital for the future of our nation’s welfare (American Psychology Association, 2014). Research has indicated AAT may be a considerable choice to help with pediatrics mental healthcare and may be utilized as an adjunct to enhance the care within the psychiatric healthcare field (Chandler, 2012). AAT has become popular within the healthcare realm (Friesen, 2009; Uyemura, 2016) and is a unique method for providing “patients” health care, which may improve patient outcomes (Chandler, 2012; Cowell, 2013; McCullough, 2016; McQuarrie & Urichuk, 2008). Research supports that “providers” in the health care field may “evade” this method of an alternative approach as an intervention due to lack of understanding (Berget, Ekeberg, & Braastad, 2008; Palley, O’Rourke, and Niemi, 2010; Uyemura, 2016; Williams & Jenkins, 2008).

Purpose: The purpose of this doctoral capstone project was to (a) explore and assess perceptions of Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) related to AAT with traditional Western treatment, as compared to only traditional treatment, at a behavioral health care center for the pediatric population, ages 4 to 16, and then (b) propose the acceptance of a practice change initiative. APRNs in mental health were of particular focus for this project.

Methods: A descriptive exploratory study in a survey questionnaire Likert-scale format was implemented among the APRNs to assess their perception in utilizing AAT in clinical practice. Results: Six APRNs volunteered to participate in this capstone project at a small community based behavioral health care center. A 26-item questionnaire was administered as the pretest, followed by an educational component, the intervention about AAT program implementation and clinical practice guideline process. Immediately after the training the APRNs completed the same questionnaire as the posttest. Descriptive data reflected a significant difference observed between the tests that displayed a large effect in knowledge and utilization of AAT.

Conclusion: A strong influence was detected on the APRNs professional understanding of AAT.