

## DOgSS - Dogs Offering Support after Stroke

**Summary:** Acute stroke can have devastating emotional impacts on people and their close companions. Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) has been shown to improve stroke-affected patients' mood, enhancing quality of life. DOgSS is a Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH) Stroke Unit action research study in South Australia to find out if dog-visits make a difference to the expressed mood of stroke patients, and monitor wellbeing of the dog.

**Background:** Having a stroke is a traumatic event. Patients, family and friends have been identified as experiencing high levels of emotional distress in acute settings in addition to the mood-altering impacts that strokes can cause. Use of AAI in acute settings is increasingly accepted internationally. Studies exploring the impact of AAI have shown that an animal's presence can have a calming effect on some people, reducing stress, lowering blood pressure and heart rate. Finding means of reducing the inherent stress associated with post-stroke experiences of shock, disablement and acute hospital inpatient stays is crucial to maximising the benefits of the diverse range of clinical interventions that have been shown to benefit recovery, but may be impeded by patients' emotional experiences.

**Aim:** We are developing a multi-disciplinary AAI program of dog-visiting in the RAH's Stroke Unit. We aim to undertake this across three action research reflective stages, collecting process and impact data at each stage, assessing and reflecting on it, and leading to implementation of adjustments and building on previous actions to enhance understandings.

**Objectives:** To determine whether –

- AAI (dog-visits) make a difference to the expressed mood of patients engaging with the dog
- how dog-visits impact on RAH Stroke Unit staff and informal patient supports and
- the impact dog-visits have on the dog and handler.

We will collect wellbeing data from stroke patients receiving AAI (dog-visiting), their informal supports (e.g., carers, family and friends) visiting at the time of the dog-visit, relevant Stroke Unit staff and the dog and handler involved for multi-faceted information about the impacts and processes of the study. This project will add to the international body of knowledge and seeks to collect ethographic and biomarker data from the non-human partner in the research team to monitor its wellbeing too.

**Team:** We are a multidisciplinary team with representation from medical, health, clinical and veterinary science, as well as social work and exercise physiology. Our Chief Investigators are Affiliate Associate Professor Anne Hamilton-Bruce, Professor Simon Koblar, Dr Janette Young, Dr Susan Hazel and Dr Carmel Nottle, as well as Associate Investigator Mr Austin Milton and Project Manager Ms Holly Bowen. We are supported in this by RAH nursing staff (led by Ms Lou Kinnear), medical staff (led by Associate Professors Tim Kleinig and Jim Jannes) and volunteers (led by Ms Pip Scott) and funded by The Hospital Research Foundation's Cure for Stroke.

**Contact:** If anyone is interested in finding out more about this research, please contact Anne Hamilton-Bruce at [anne.hamilton-bruce@sa.gov.au](mailto:anne.hamilton-bruce@sa.gov.au)

### References:

Bunketorp-Käll et al., *Topics in Stroke Rehabilitation* (2018); Bures et al., *Rehabilitation Nursing* (2016); Chen et al., *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes* (2015); Gee et al., *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017); Machová et al., *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2019); Muñoz Lasa et al., *Neurologia* (2015); Rowat et al., *Journal of Advanced Nursing* (2016).