Occlusion of Vision in Old English Sheepdogs

Michael W. Fox

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/acwp_vsm

Part of the Animal Studies Commons, Other Animal Sciences Commons, and the Other Genetics and Genomics Commons

Recommended Citation
Some Rights for Animal Therapists: Better Science and Better Welfare

Dana H. Murphy

"Animal-facilitated therapy." The phrase has a nice, solid ring to it, doesn't it? And it also sounds like an idea that nearly everyone could agree to endorse, like democracy and vacations. But a closer scrutiny of some of the available literature on the use of animals as adjuncts in situations closer and outpatient psychotherapy reveals a number of deficiencies. While there is probably nothing wrong with the fundamental concept—ideally, people and animals are helping each other to become more useful and independent—there are some real problems in two areas: the dubious level of scientific rigor in many of the reports on animal-facilitated therapy, and the scant consideration given to the welfare of the animal therapists themselves.

In a paper presented at the International Conference on the Human/Companion Animal Bond in October 1981, Michael McCulloch goes on at some length about the history of animals as therapeutic agents. He concludes each short section about animal-facilitated therapy with a version of the same refrain: "The scientific rigor necessary to arrive at a judgment on the effectiveness of animals in therapy is relatively easy to achieve, with a little thought. A far more difficult issue is how an animal being employed as a therapist ought to be treated, especially in light of the incredible range of conditions and environments that animals will probably be working in at some time in the near future.

As Michael Fox noted in the last issue of the Journal (34:267, 1982), our choice of language about animals both reflects and conditions the way we think about them. He discussed our desensitization to the plight of confinement farm animals through use of the phrase "production units," and of lab animals by the impersonal term "specimens." It is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the same insensitivity to animals' needs emerges from the literature on animal-facilitated therapy. A paper by Leo Bustad and Linda Hines (Cal Vet 36:45-50, 1982) here, the authors, noting that research on survival after the onset of coronary heart disease has seldom included both physiological and psychosocial variables, attempted to correlate 1-year survival with a long list of potential causal factors. Pet ownership was but one item on an extensive social inventory given to each patient; psychological mood status and severity of disease were also measured at the same time. Precisely because all (or nearly all) of the factors that might have had an effect on the further course of the disease were included in the study, the authors were able to conclude, with a high degree of certainty, that pet ownership was a very important positive factor in determining whether a person survived heart disease, or merely succumbed. The authors were even able to rule out the variable of increased exercise, which might have been one reason why those with dogs (which require more care, especially daily visits) lived on. In fact, the species of companion animal owned was found to have virtually no bearing on the 1-year survival data.

The scientific rigor necessary to arrive at a judgment on the effectiveness of animals in therapy is relatively easy to achieve, with a little thought. A far more difficult issue is how an animal being employed as a therapist ought to be treated, especially in light of the incredible range of conditions and environments that animals will probably be working in at some time in the near future.

As Michael Fox noted in the last issue of the Journal (34:267, 1982), our choice of language about animals both reflects and conditions the way we think about them. He discussed our desensitization to the plight of confinement farm animals through use of the phrase "production units," and of lab animals by the impersonal term "specimens." It is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the same insensitivity to animals' needs emerges from the literature on animal-facilitated therapy. A paper by Leo Bustad and Linda Hines (Cal Vet 36:45-50, 1982) here, the authors, noting that research on survival after the onset of coronary heart disease has seldom included both physiological and psychosocial variables, attempted to correlate 1-year survival with a long list of potential causal factors. Pet ownership was but one item on an extensive social inventory given to each patient; psychological mood status and severity of disease were also measured at the same time. Precisely because all (or nearly all) of the factors that might have had an effect on the further course of the disease were included in the study, the authors were able to conclude, with a high degree of certainty, that pet ownership was a very important positive factor in determining whether a person survived heart disease, or merely succumbed. The authors were even able to rule out the variable of increased exercise, which might have been one reason why those with dogs (which require more care, especially daily visits) lived on. In fact, the species of companion animal owned was found to have virtually no bearing on the 1-year survival data.

The scientific rigor necessary to arrive at a judgment on the effectiveness of animals in therapy is relatively easy to achieve, with a little thought. A far more difficult issue is how an animal being employed as a therapist ought to be treated, especially in light of the incredible range of conditions and environments that animals will probably be working in at some time in the near future.

As Michael Fox noted in the last issue of the Journal (34:267, 1982), our choice of language about animals both reflects and conditions the way we think about them. He discussed our desensitization to the plight of confinement farm animals through use of the phrase "production units," and of lab animals by the impersonal term "specimens." It is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the same insensitivity to animals' needs emerges from the literature on animal-facilitated therapy. A paper by Leo Bustad and Linda Hines (Cal Vet 36:45-50, 1982) here, the authors, noting that research on survival after the onset of coronary heart disease has seldom included both physiological and psychosocial variables, attempted to correlate 1-year survival with a long list of potential causal factors. Pet ownership was but one item on an extensive social inventory given to each patient; psychological mood status and severity of disease were also measured at the same time. Precisely because all (or nearly all) of the factors that might have had an effect on the further course of the disease were included in the study, the authors were able to conclude, with a high degree of certainty, that pet ownership was a very important positive factor in determining whether a person survived heart disease, or merely succumbed. The authors were even able to rule out the variable of increased exercise, which might have been one reason why those with dogs (which require more care, especially daily visits) lived on. In fact, the species of companion animal owned was found to have virtually no bearing on the 1-year survival data.
that it is necessary to keep the hair over the dog's eyes in order to protect them from sunlight. In fact, when the hair is lifted up to expose the eyes to daylight, a photophobic reaction (blinking, lacrimation, etc.) does occur, which leads the owner to the erroneous conclusion that the eyes actually need to be left covered. However, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that an animal whose eyes are almost totally obscured from any contact with sunlight will show photophobia when the eyes are exposed. This is no reason for keeping an animal's eyes permanently covered. Furthermore, the eyes, since they are continually being irritated by hair, are likely to develop chronic conjunctivitis, which may in turn lead to corneal ulceration and other ophthalmic problems.

Many owners of Old English sheepdogs and other breeds with long facial hair believe that, since the hair covers the dog's eyes, it must be "natural" or serve some beneficial purpose that was deliberately introduced as a trait through selective breeding. Such myths need to be dispelled for the health and welfare of these breeds. Instead, owners are advised to either trim the hair away from their dog's eyes or tie it up on top of the animal's head with a ribbon or elastic band.

Dogs entered in shows with visual occlusion of their eyes; shy, timid, and unpredictable, lead to a photophobic reaction. Many owners of Old English sheepdogs believe that, since the hair covers the dog's eyes or tie it up on top of the animal's head with a ribbon or elastic band.

In many cases, when the hair is suddenly left uncovered, the animal may in turn lead to corneal ulceration and other ophthalmic problems. One such device, the Feenix Tronic, Inc., of Hastings, NE. My laboratory has been engaged for a period of time in the investigation of physiological and clinical effects of this device as it is applied in management procedures for beef calves.

Preliminary Verdict for Electro-Immobilization

What a electronic immobilizer does is easy to see—after electric current from the device is passed through an animal's body, the animal is "locked" into immobility, and procedures such as branding can be performed with a minimum of hassle. But how it works, and whether pain is partially or completely blocked by the procedure, are a great deal harder to figure out. The manufacturers of one such device, the Feenix Stockstill, claim that pain is indeed blocked during the duration of immobility. But the Scientific Advisory Panel of the World Society for the Protection of Animals, in a memo dated September 22, 1982, voiced some skepticism about the effectiveness of these devices. Specifically, they wanted to know whether the equipment:

1. Is safe for subject and operator.
2. Induces anesthesia (or analgesia), or merely a state of immobility that prevents the animal from displaying typical signs of pain.
3. Should be restricted to qualified persons, or could be used by laymen safely and humanely.

In response to a letter from Michael Fox which, among other items, raised these questions, James F. Amend, D.V.M., Ph.D. (University of Nebraska, Lincoln) summarized his recent results with the Vet-Master animal immobilizer. That response is reproduced here.

I am pleased to respond to your inquiry concerning the Vet-Master animal immobilizer, currently produced by Ag-Tronic, Inc., of Hastings, NE. My laboratory has been engaged for a period of time in the investigation of physiological and clinical effects of this device as it is applied in management procedures for beef calves.

As you may be aware, use of electric currents for manipulating muscles, reducing pain sensations, producing therapeutic sleep, or providing general surgical anesthesia has been studied in many species of animals, and in man, since the pioneering work of LeDuc in 1962. Numerous research reports presented over the past 80 years have produced two critical concerns in relation to design of this type of device. First, one must choose with great care the manner of electrical contact between device and subject, and second, one must determine very precisely the properties of the electric current applied. Our studies with the beef calves have addressed these two concerns as we have participated in evaluation of the Vet-Master animal immobilizer.

With regard to the manner of electrical contact between device and subject, earlier investigators thought it was essential to deliver electrical current directly into body fluids, thereby providing a low-resistance path for the current, avoiding electrical burns of the skin and delivering an adequate amount of electrical energy to the subject. In development of the Vet-Master, which makes electrical contact with the animal in the relatively contaminated regions of mouth and anus, we were concerned that penetration of the skin with any type of needle to reach the body fluids would create risk of infection, as well as cause pain upon application of the contacts. We therefore developed nontraumatic rectal probes and lip contacts, which deliver current to the body fluids by way of the moist rectal surface, and saliva within the mouth, respectively. These contacts have proved to be excellent low-resistance routes through which electric current can be delivered. No tissue trauma has been observed at these sites in any animal we have immobilized with the Vet-Master. Absence of pain upon attachment reduces the need for initial physical restraint as well.