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Stress levels in dogs, and its recognition by their handlers, during animal-assisted therapy in a prison

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Abstract

The stress on dogs and their handlers during animal-assisted therapy in a prison programme was evaluated using questionnaires and measurement of the dogs' saliva cortisol concentrations before and after the sessions. Their handlers were volunteers who underwent training classes with their pet dogs. Overall, the dogs did not show serious signs of stress in the programme, which was also the impression of their handlers. In most cases, the dogs' saliva cortisol values decreased following their participation in the sessions. There was an association between the dogs' stress levels and the handlers' self-reported stress. In 11% of cases, the dogs were evaluated as stressed during the session, but their saliva cortisol values did not change significantly from before to after the session. Some handlers might have misconstrued their dogs' behavioural states. Improvement of the dogs' welfare may be achievable through giving feedback to the handlers to more accurately evaluate their dogs' behaviours, by strengthening the selection of appropriate units and classes prior the programme, by developing a programme and handling methods less burdensome to the animals, and by enhancing the aftercare of animals when they are stressed in a session. Achievement of these goals would also strengthen the bonds between dogs and handlers, contributing to a more effective programme for clients.

Keywords: *animal-assisted therapy, animal welfare, behaviour, cortisol, dogs, stress*