

Brighter Days and Calmer Nights: The Impact of Service Dogs in the Lives of Veterans Who Problematically Use Substances



International Working Dog Conference

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April, 2016



Outline

- Gaps in understanding: the human animal-bond & problematic substance use among military veterans
- Project methodology
- Findings and implications/next steps
- One Health as a framework for understanding



“He brightens my days and calms my nights”.

- Capt. Luis Carlos Montalvan (2011). *Until Tuesday: A Wounded Warrior and the Golden Retriever Who Saved Him*. Hyperion: New York.



Colleen Dell

- Extreme K-9
- Harcum College
- Work with 3 St. John Ambulance therapy dogs
- Visited with AUDEAMUS program participants
- Doing service dog training



AUDEAMUS

A bilingual, injured veteran-run, not for profit organization dedicated to the principle and practice of providing highly skilled and effective Certified service dogs to persons traumatized in the line of duty and whose quality of life depends on it. AUDEAMUS dogs meet the highly regarded K9SI Standards for service dogs

(<http://www.k9si.com>)

(www.audeamus.ca).





Literature

- The benefits of service dogs can range from aiding with practical tasks, to psychological and emotional support in stressful situations, through to unwavering companionship. Virtually unexplored is the relationship to addressing problematic substance use.
- Self-medicating behavior, in particular problematic alcohol use, is prevalent among individuals with PTSD and depression (Breslau et al., 1991).
- PTSD and substance use problems are both diagnosable medical conditions which impact veterans' mental health and wellness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).



Focus

Identify the role of service dogs in veterans' health and wellness (focus on alcohol and illicit and licit drugs) & the linkage to the impact of the **human animal bond** in addressing both veterans' PTSD and decreasing their problematic use of substances.

1. How has your service dog helped you in general (physical, mental, social, spiritual) - what changed in your life because of your service dog?
2. How has your service dog helped you reduce or eliminate your misuse of substances, specifically alcohol (and illicit drugs if applicable), as well as any prescribed medications, like opiates/narcotics, which have the potential for abuse?



Methodology

- Learned from 7 military veterans (5 male & 2 female) living with PTSD and paired with an AUDEAMUS service dog. All acknowledged some degree of problematic substance use.
- Plus two veteran police officers (first responders) = 9 participants
- 25 single spaced, typed responses to the two questions.

Findings

Backgrounds

- From happy to traumatic
- Several identified being fond of animals in childhood (friend, confidant) and adulthood

Wellness

- All suffered traumatic events during service, some specific events (e.g., near death experiences) and others cumulative effects (e.g., harassment).
- All witnessed and experienced death, cruelty, violence, abuse, neglect, inhumanity, devastation, trauma and abandonment.
- "Always on alert"





Darker Days & Turbulent Nights

- Attempt to escape (not be home, work overseas)
- Family hardship and breakup
- Loss of identity/position & shame
- Flashbacks/nightmares/insomnia
- Pain, numbness, anxiety, hate, anger, loss, depression
- Self harm, suicide ideation & attempts
- Isolation

Licit and illicit drug use, including alcohol

- Alcohol: Drink to cope (pain, sleep, comfort); keep bottled up; culture; varied extents (some accessed treatment)
- Prescription drugs: Highly medicated (cannot function); misuse
- Illicit drugs: Sense of peace



Brighter Days & Calmer Nights

- Dog: 'saved my life'; 'changed my life'; 'alleviated my symptoms'
- AUDEMUS is a meaningful support:
Marc; meet others 'like me' /peer support; pay it forward to veterans
- Reduce/eliminate alcohol and illicit drugs; significant decrease in prescription medication (and side effects such as poor concentration and low energy) & take medications as prescribed (not misuse)

Mental

- Love: unconditional; love at first sight; bond from day one
- Positivity: reminds me there is good in the world; feel happy, alive; new outlook on life; greatest thing since birth of my child
- Mindfulness: in the moment and present; ground me so my emotions do not build; calmness
- Companionship/comfort: always there; not alone; my rock
- Self: regained dignity, confidence, leadership, identity, accomplishment

Social

- Connection: caring for dog allows veteran to care for self and family; sense of obligation to dog
- Socialization: store (Costco), fly, new friends, family visits; talk with dog
- Break down barriers: safe, challenged to do new things

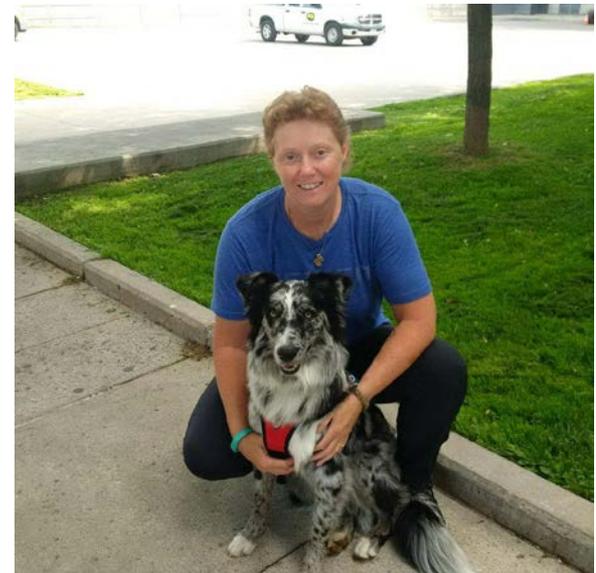


Physical

- wake up from nightmares
- physical comfort/cuddle
- hearing
- at side: 'with me 24/7 and no human can do that'
- warn when going to collapse
- decrease in unhealthy behaviours (road rage)
- keep me out of busy situations
- more physically active: walking, exercise; play; training; out on own for medical appointments (including addictions treatment) and generally (e.g., pick up kids from school)
- routine, consistency, reason to get out of bed

Spiritual

- Purpose
- Inseparable / bond and connection





A Framework for Understanding

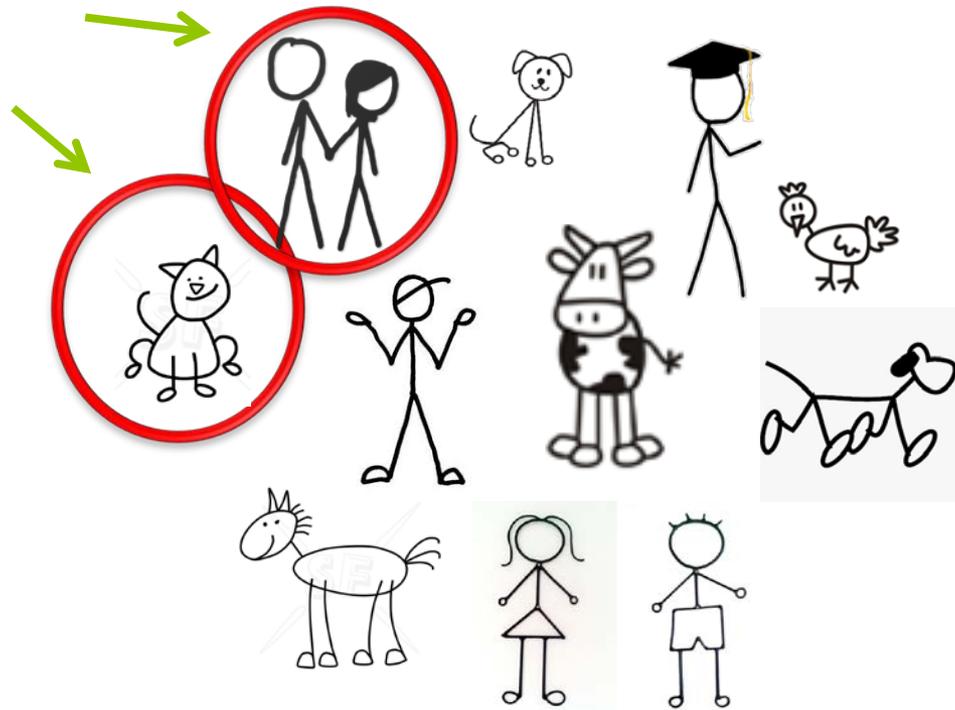
“The field of AAls currently lacks a unified, widely accepted, or empirically supported framework for explaining how and why relationships between humans and animals are potentially therapeutic”

Kruger, K., & Serpell, J. (2010). Animal-assisted interventions in mental health: Definitions and theoretical foundations. In A. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (3rd ed., pp. 33–48). San Diego, CA: Academic Press. P. 37.



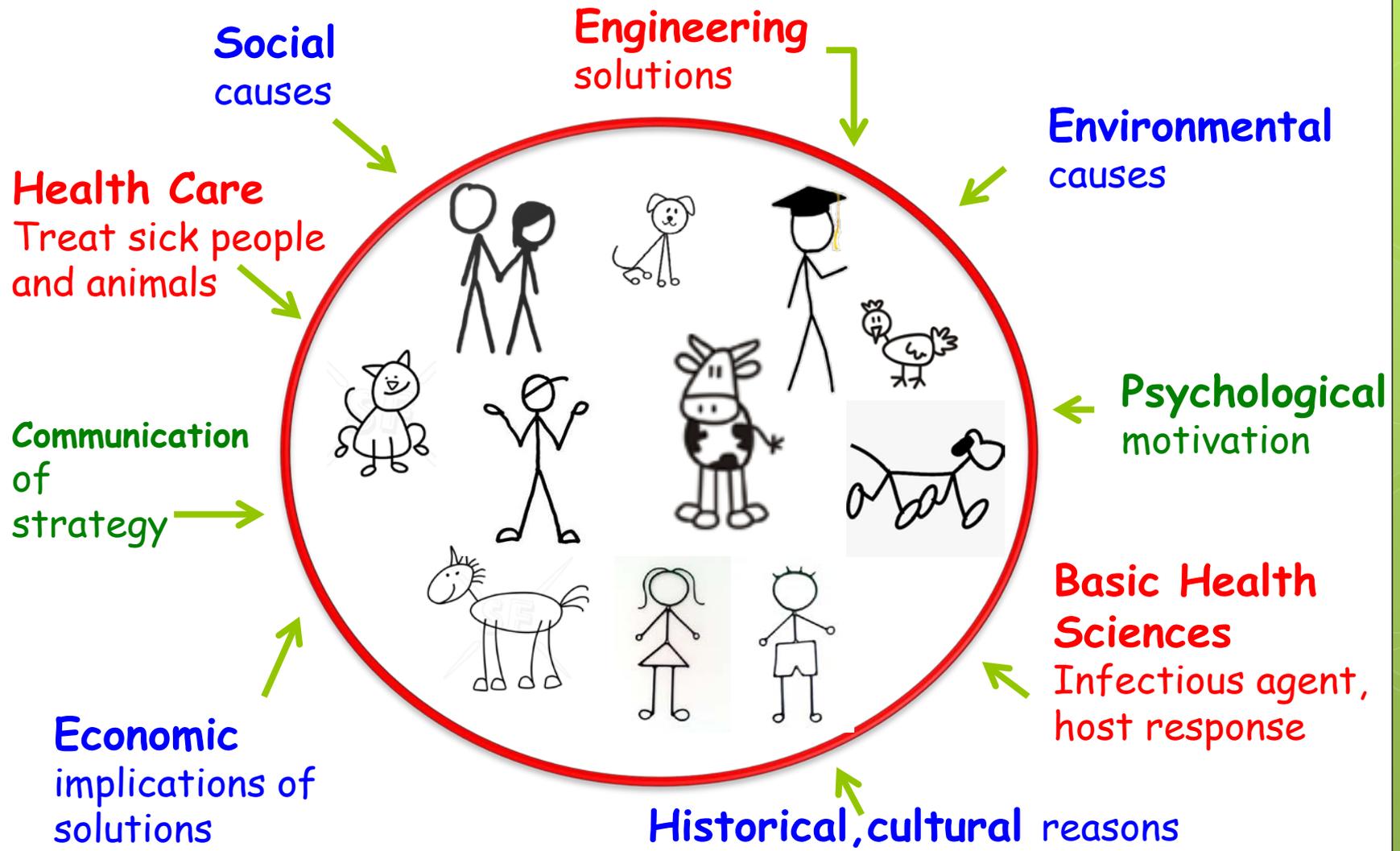
Health Care

Treat sick people
and animals





We need an interdisciplinary team: One Health





Research Chair in One Health & Wellness

Forum

Applying One Health to the Study of Animal-Assisted Interventions

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Abstract: The use of animal-assisted interventions in therapeutic programs is a growing phenomenon. Animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) involve a variety of species (dogs, cats, horses, domesticated birds, etc.) in primary health care. Despite their increasing application in a wide range of therapeutic services, the empirical evidence base of AAIs is limited. The authors of this paper propose that the public health framework of One Health can be adapted to advance AAI research. One Health's perspective on the environment is primarily ecological. The environmental impact on the human-animal interactions within AAIs, however, incorporates social, cultural, political, and economic factors. The environment has received minimal attention in AAI research. The authors discuss how this framework has been used in their prior AAI research and work with Indigenous people. Applying this framework to AAIs may guide future AAI research.

Keywords: One Health, animal-assisted interventions (AAIs), zooecyia, human-animal bond, social environment, indigenous worldviews, research framework and AAIs

An animal-assisted intervention (AAI) is “any intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals as a part of a therapeutic or ameliorative process or milieu” (Kruger and Serpell 2006, p. 25). AAIs involve a variety of species (dogs, cats, horses, domesticated birds, etc.) in primary health care. Despite their increasing application in a wide range of therapeutic services, the empirical evidence base of AAIs is limited (Kamioka et al. 2014; Maujean et al. 2015). The public health framework of One Health can be adapted to advance AAI research.

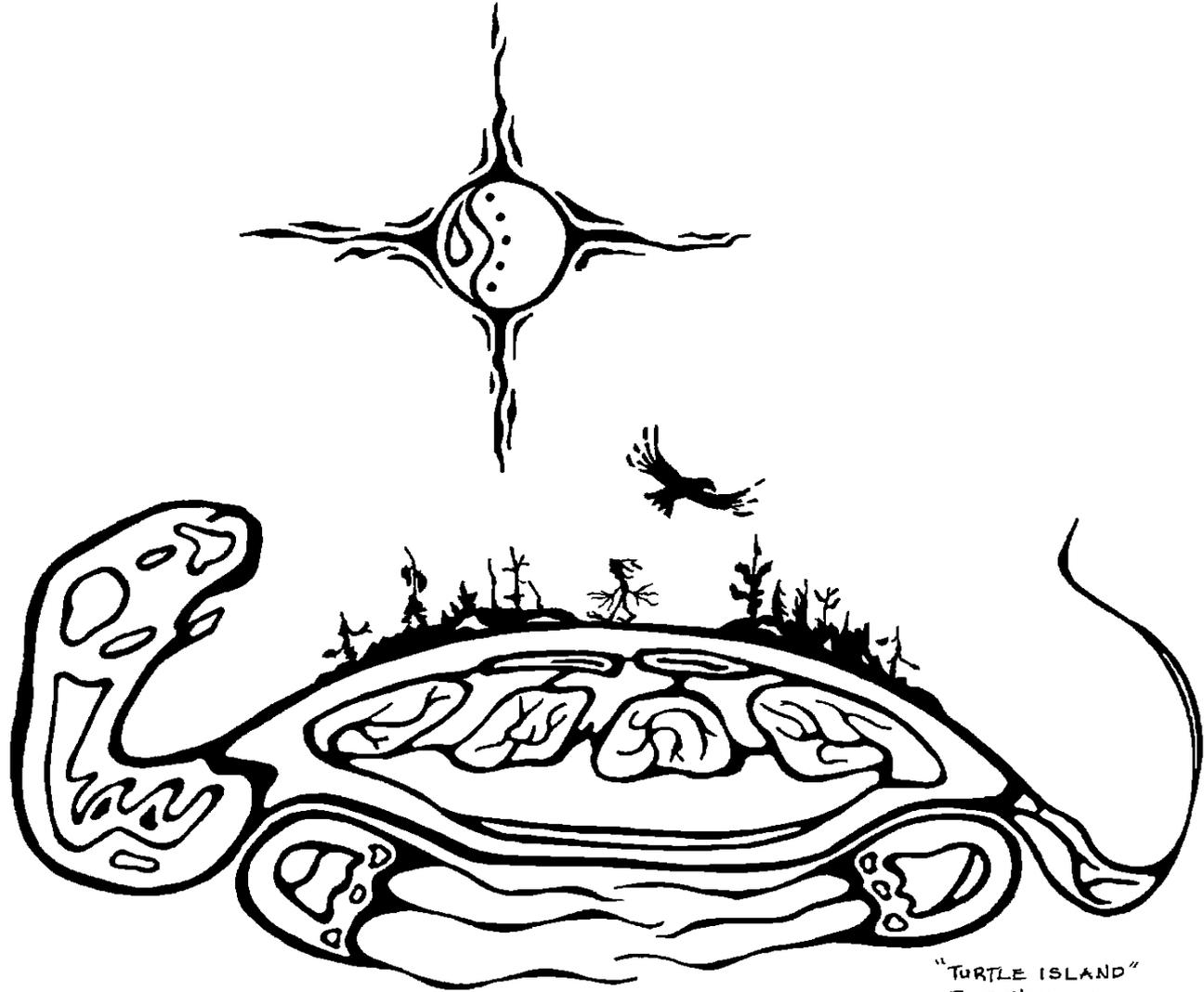
One Health takes a multi-disciplinary approach to optimizing the health of humans, animals, and the environment (One Health Initiative, nd). The roots of One

Health are in nineteenth century comparative medicine, which used animal models to advance human medicine. In 1984, Calvin Schwabe identified ‘One Medicine’ as considering “the close systematic interaction of humans and animals for nutrition, livelihood and health” (Schwabe, 1984 in Zinsstag et al. 2011, p. 151). One Medicine evolved into One Health in 2004, integrating human medicine, veterinary medicine, and environmental sciences. One priority is preventing the emergence and spread of zoonoses—diseases that spread from animals to people—to protect human health (Canadian Public Health Association). Hodgson and Darling (2011) introduced the concept of zooecyia to the One Health field in 2011 as “the positive inverse of zoonosis” (p. 189), the multiple benefits to human health from interacting and bonding with companion animals. Zooecyia provides “the evidence base for the

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https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/31696/3/Broadbridge_Legge_Linklater_Renee_L_201111_PhD_thesis.pdf



"TURTLE ISLAND"
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