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The Japan Times
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Retrieved April 27, 2004

Therapists turn to toy animals
Fluffy robots' healing effects on patients, aged touted

SHIZUOKA (Kyodo) Takayuki Kumasaka of the University of Shizuoka is a leading proponent of the use of toy animals in "animal therapy" to produce healing effects in patients in hospitals and residents of nursing homes.

The theory is that even toy animals can help relieve patients undergoing treatment or in recuperation from worries about their maladies, leading hospitals and health facilities to adopt the therapy.

Kumasaka, an assistant professor specializing in care of adults and the elderly in the university's nursing school, said Japan still depends on volunteers to provide care for those in need.

He devotes much of his time doing research for wider introduction of animal therapy by trying out robots and toys for the welfare of the elderly.

Kumasaka is particular about utilizing robots and toys, because real animals can carry infectious diseases or cause injury or accidents.

In the course of carrying out his research, he introduced a robotic seal named Palo to the pediatrics ward of Tsukuba University hospital three years ago and confirmed its soothing effect on hospitalized children.

He conducted animal therapy in late August to find a similar result on the elderly using a 5,900 yen "welfare toy" dubbed Otomodachikku Wanchan (Friendly Dog).

"Children were able to gain healing effects from the robot, which looked a bit like the Aibo robot," he said, referring to Sony Corp.'s robot dog.

Wanchan is a puppy toy operated by dry cell batteries. It is soft to the touch, easy to manipulate and rich in expressions.

It has an optical sensor in its nose and when a person approaches, it says "bow wow" while wagging its tail and cocking its head.

When it hears the person say "hand," it extends its paw. It sings in "dog language" when asked to sing a song.

Kumasaka put six Wanchan toys in the lobby and locker room of a dialysis treatment facility in Shizuoka Prefecture as part of a test for his animal therapy.

Taking part in the therapy were 19 outpatients -- eight men and 11 women -- ranging in age from their 60s to 80s.

Using a 20-step method as a yardstick to gauge the patients' state of mind through their facial expressions, ranging from smiles to tears, Kumasaka checked Wanchan's effects on them.

A grading of 11 to 10 was given to those feeling normal, 20 to those feeling the most depressed and 1 to those feeling the best.

Two patients were showing the 20 rating before the toy dogs were brought in.

The average grading of all those participating was 9.95 before the experiment.

Many said they were often in the dumps because they can never stop the dialysis and they were "in bad condition many times."

They said on the day Wanchan toys were placed in the facility that they felt "good," that the toy dogs were "cute" and that "it would be good if they could have them at home."

The average reading went up to 5.5, showing the improvement in their feelings.

After nine sessions, nine patients registered a 1 rating, raising the average to 3.3.

The patients' reaction also changed, with many saying they became "oblivious" to their sickness, felt at ease stroking Wanchan's head and experienced a "healing effect."

"I think I was able to confirm that even toys can do this (have soothing effects on patients)," Kumasaka said. "They have all begun showing bright expressions."

In a related experiment, a health center for the elderly in Aichi Prefecture used a real beagle to find out if it had any healing effect on 10 women.

Using the same scale, their state of mind was 9.9 on average before the therapy but shot up to 1.7 during the test, according to Kumasaka.

"I thought the power of a live animal was great after all," Kumasaka said.

A live animal can be used for animal therapy with the approval of a veterinarian. Insurance against injuries with a daily premium of 2,000 yen was taken out before the beagle came to the facility. The insurance guaranteed a maximum of 10 million yen in compensation.

Kumasaka said he ultimately hopes to introduce toys as substitutes for live animals in hospital wards caring for cancer patients as a means to relieve their pain.

The Japan Times: Oct. 28, 2003
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