

Elderly Benefit From Real or Robotic Dogs

A study finds that nursing home residents felt less lonely after spending time with a dog – real or robotic.

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A recent study of three nursing homes by St. Louis University researchers found that residents felt less lonely whether a robotic or living dog kept them company.

“For those people who can’t have a living pet, but who would like to have a pet, robotics could address the issue of companionship,” said William Banks, M.D., professor of geriatric medicine at Saint Louis University.

The relatively small study included 38 residents, divided into three groups. Prior to the study, all residents were asked questions to assess their levels of loneliness. One group received weekly, half-hour visits from a real dog (a medium-sized Mixed Breed named Sparky), while a second group received similar visiting time with a canine robot, Aibo (discontinued by manufacturer Sony in 2006). The third group did not receive visits from either dog. After seven weeks, a final assessment of all residents’ levels of loneliness was taken, and they were asked how attached they were to Sparky or Aibo.

Residents that received visits from either dog, “felt less lonely and more attached to their canine attention-givers,” than those who did not see either dog, the study found. Additionally, “no statistical difference” in improvement was found between the real dog and robotic dog groups.

“The most surprising thing is they worked almost equally well in terms of alleviating loneliness and causing residents to form attachments,” Banks said. “There is a lot of loneliness in nursing homes and animal-assisted therapy – whether from a dog or a robot – is one answer for addressing that.”

He suggested that the findings could have far-reaching effects if canine robots were used in home healthcare, too.

“This health companion could follow a person in his home, giving reminders on when to take medication or sending out an alert when a person has suddenly gone from a vertical position to a horizontal one,” Banks said. “A person could get tired of a robot following him around, but if you could change that inanimate voyeur to a personal part of his life and a companion, that could be entirely different.”

The research was published in the March issue of the Journal of the American Medical Directors Association.