Brittany DeGraves - University of Alberta

Project: *Reducing Pandemic Stress Effects Among the Most Vulnerable: People Living in Long-Term Care*

Biography

Brittany graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing Honors in 2020 and is currently working as a Registered Nurse in Cardiology and a Research Assistant for Translating Research in Elder Care at the University of Alberta where she has worked for the last three years. Currently, Brittany is a Master's of Nursing Student and is continuing to build upon her passion for research focused on improving the quality of life of residents and the quality of work-life of care aides in long-term care. She has also worked to develop her experience in research through completing an internship in the Netherlands focused on innovative dementia care facilities and continuing to work as a Research Associate with Maastricht University in the Netherlands. Brittany hopes to continue to develop her research and clinical abilities to become a Ph.D. prepared clinician-scientist with a focus on Geriatrics and Long-Term Care.

For her Master's thesis, Brittany will be working on projects focused on improving the mental health of residents in long-term care by reducing pandemic-related stress through innovative interventions including pet and robot dog therapies. During this time, Brittany will also continue to work on previous work she has developed focused on innovative dementia care homes while gaining experience as a Registered Nurse. Brittany looks forward to continuing to enhancing her research abilities and knowledge through the Alberta SPOR Graduate Studentship.

Project Summary

COVID-19 has devastated long-term care homes, resulting in high mental health stressors for long-term care residents with possible impacts of trauma, confusion, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders. Over 80% of long-term care residents have dementia and experience a range of stressful symptoms including impaired comprehension, mood alterations, loss of executive functions, and behavioural and psychological symptoms such as aggression. These behaviours relate to a possible history of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorders, and mental illnesses.

Individuals with dementia and previous trauma require an innovative person-centred care approach using alternative interventions to reduce stress. Pet therapy as an innovative intervention, has positive effects on mental and physical health by helping to regulate behaviours and stress, increase mental wellbeing, and increase socialization in dementia. Similar effects have been identified in studies using robot dog therapies. By studying both a pet therapy and robot dog therapy group we can identify the influence on innovative interventions in a larger group of individuals including those who may have barriers to interacting with real animals such as cultural considerations and allergies.

No studies have currently compared robot dog therapy with traditional pet therapy at large dosing rates to evaluate outcomes of stress relief and psychological behaviours related to COVID-19 in long-term care. Brittany's research will evaluate the feasibility of delivering such an intervention during COVID-19 in long-term care homes and provide a base by working with residents to build a larger control trial to provide these innovative interventions to a larger group of long-term care residents.