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Animal Assisted Therapy: An explorative case study of elder residents'  
experiences with a therapeutic canine within a long-term residential setting

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## Abstract

*“The bond with a true dog is as lasting as the ties of this earth can ever be”  
(Lorenz, 1994, p. 148).*

History suggests that man and canine have shared a therapeutic relationship for centuries, however speculation regarding the significance of the therapeutic relationship on our overall wellbeing has been debated. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has had a rapid increase in research interest over the last forty years but its progress is inhibited by the dearth of information involving the perspectives of AAT users. This pilot, qualitative, explorative case study research explores elder residents’ experiences of interacting with a trained canine within a long-term residential setting, Elizabeth Knox, an Eden Alternative care home and hospital. Experiences of residents were gathered via individual semi-structured interviews, and data was analysed and interpreted through thematic analysis. Knowledge, or meaning, is understood from a social constructionist perspective, recognising that meaning is created and interpreted from social, lived experiences in the moment. A prominent theme of connectedness was constructed and further defined into two sub-themes, emotional connectedness and social connectedness. Findings suggest that for this population of elder residents, AAT is an initiative that has multiple therapeutic health benefits which are influenced by the visual and behavioural characteristics of the canine. Findings contribute to an international supposition that canine AAT can be a beneficial therapeutic initiative for elders. Additionally, findings have built a platform for New Zealand contextual AAT research to further advance the understanding of the potential therapeutic benefits of canines when in relationships with people.

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