

Display Settings: Abstract

Soc Sci Med. 1992 Jun;34(12):1325-34.

Intimacy, domesticity and pet therapy with the elderly: expectation and experience among nursing home volunteers.

Savishinsky JS.

Department of Anthropology, Ithaca College, NY 14850.

Abstract

A study of volunteers in three nursing homes revealed that their role had several unexpected consequences for institutional residents and for the volunteers themselves. The research, carried out in geriatric facilities in upstate New York, focused on community members and college students working in a **pet therapy** program, through which they brought companion animals to various institutions on a weekly basis. Visiting people and pets re-created an aura of domesticity for residents who had been cut off from homes and families by age and illness. Consonant with this domestic perception by residents was the self-image that volunteers developed of their role: most came to see themselves as family and friends to patients rather than as visitors, strangers, or adjunct staff. Volunteering, however, was an emotionally demanding experience that some people handled more successfully than others. While certain individuals found the costs of this unexpected intimacy to be too high, others discovered significant rewards in what one person called its 'selfish altruism.' Several factors were found to mediate how volunteers felt about what they did, and whether or not they continued with their work over a long period of time. These variables included: (a) the motives that people had for becoming volunteers, (b) their prior experience doing this kind of work, (c) their career orientations, and current family and living situation, and (d) the image that they had of the elderly in general and nursing homes in particular.

PMID: 1529370 [PubMed - indexed for MEDLINE]

MeSH Terms

LinkOut - more resources