

# **A Paw-sitive Dentist Appointment: The Impact of Providing Therapy Dogs in Dental Appointments on the Experience of Dental Anxiety in Veteran Patients**

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**Background:** Dental anxiety is a barrier to oral healthcare utilization. Existing research suggests that U.S. military veterans may be more likely to experience dental anxiety and therefore more likely to avoid dental treatment. Providing therapy dogs chairside during a dental appointment could be an effective intervention to minimize dental anxiety and increase oral healthcare utilization among veteran patients. The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of providing therapy dogs during dental appointments on the experience of dental anxiety in veteran patients at the University of Colorado School of Dental Medicine.

**Methods:** In a quasi-experimental study between September – November 2022, twenty veteran patients scheduled in the student clinics were identified. Ten patients had a therapy dog present during their appointment and ten did not. Pre and post measurements of anxiety (pulse, blood pressure, Anxiety Scale surveys) were completed. A data analysis compared measures pre to post and compared measures experimental to control, using appropriate descriptive and paired t-tests with SPSS software.

**Results:** Reduction in pulse was highly significant post-intervention ( $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ). Experimental patients with a therapy dog present during the appointment had a lower mean pulse compared to control patients without a dog present (64.50 and 76.00 respectively). Experimental patients had a lower mean systolic blood pressure compared to control patients (131.75 and 136.75 respectively).

**Conclusions:** Providing therapy dogs in dental appointments appears to result in reduction in pulse, a measure of anxiety.