

# Animals involved in psychiatric care A study conducted in West-Flanders (Belgium)

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## **Purpose**

This study is part of a follow up research (2004 – 2011). The original study was developed and implemented by researchers of Ghent University – Laboratory of Ethology ([www.ethology.ugent.be](http://www.ethology.ugent.be)).

The aim of this study was to investigate whether nurses of Residential Psychiatric Units (RPUs) (West Flanders, Belgium) already involve animals into their care programmes.

## **Method**

We collected data from 57 RPUs. Thirty two of them completed a semi-structured telephone or face to face interview.

## **Results**

The results showed that 68,75% of the studied RPUs already involve animals: 59,37% of the RPUs keep institutional animals mainly birds (63,16%), fish (52,63%), turtles (10,53%), hamsters (10,53%), cats (5,26%), and/or dogs (5,26%). The research revealed that 57.89% of the respondents thought there might be risks for the animals involved. None of the animals have undergone previous selection or training. Twenty one percent of the respondents choose to cooperate with organizations that already promote interaction with animals. Eight RPUs involved animals in real therapy sessions (AAT).

## **Conclusion**

These preliminary results show that there are already animals involved by psychiatric nurses in RPUs. These animals are rather seen in RPUs recreational activities or for institutional purposes. Education about animal-assisted interventions for psychiatric nurses is recommended.

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## **Key words**

Animal-assisted Interventions – Animal-assisted Therapy – Animal-assisted Activity – Psychiatric nurse – Mental Hospital – West Flanders (Belgium)

