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A Professional Dialogue with Dr. Amanda Cheung on Rehabilitation Dog Services: What Works in Fostering a Rehabilitative Culture



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Introduction of our Honorary Advisor Dr. Amanda Cheung

Dr. Amanda Kingsze Cheung, a research assistant professor at The University of Hong Kong, a registered clinical psychologist in Hong Kong and a licensed psychologist in the United States, is particularly interested in studying areas of emotional, behavioural and cognitive vulnerabilities. In July 2024, Dr. Cheung was invited to be the honorary advisor of the Rehabilitation Dog Services of the Correctional Services Department (CSD). Our Senior Clinical Psychologist, Dr. Vivian Mak, had the chance to conduct an exclusive interview with this prominent expert on the subjects of the development of a rehabilitative culture and the provision of Rehabilitation Dog Services.

Dr. Mak: Thank you for being our honorary advisor. Rehabilitation work has significant meaning in recovery and overcoming. Can you tell us what works in persons in custody's rehabilitation? What are the key components that contribute to the success of rehabilitation?

Dr. Cheung: This is perhaps the core question of any kind of rehabilitation services. All of us want to know how we can best rehabilitate persons in custody (PICs). What work(s)? To work with individual PICs on intrapersonal changes (e.g. cognitive skills programmes; Hollin et al., 2013), it is equally important to foster a supportive environment to facilitate rehabilitation. This brings us closer to **the idea of a rehabilitative culture.**

Dr. Mak: Recognising the importance of a rehabilitative culture, can you tell us how to foster such a culture?

Dr. Cheung: Building a rehabilitative culture is an ongoing journey about developing and refining approaches to promoting support and healing. It is the philosophical basis in a successful rehabilitation programme. **Programmes that work the best are not only about what to do** but also depend on how they are implemented. An **environment that promotes growth** definitely helps enhance the effectiveness of the rehabilitation efforts. We know that there is a huge need for psychological interventions among PICs. The prevalence of life challenges (Neupert et al., 2017); mental health conditions, such as

trauma related disorders (Baranyi et al., 2018) and substance use disorders (Fazel et al., 2017) are much higher among PICs than in the general population. Specific programmes may target individual changes, and a supportive rehabilitative culture offers PICs the **environment to grow their skills and a sense of agency**. Having heard that the CSD has recently implemented the Rehabilitation Dog Services, I am curious about how these rehabilitation dogs can contribute to a supportive environment in a correctional setting. How can we best implement the Rehabilitation Dog Services to maximise PICs' growth and transformation while they are serving their time behind bars?

Rehabilitation Dog Services

Interactions with animals can help create meaningful relationships for both the animals and the persons involved (Wilson, 2023). Dogs are able to recognise emotions in humans and respond to them (Albuquerque et al., 2016). A variety of prison-based animal programmes have been found beneficial to PICs' health by promoting a sense of safety in prisons (Jalongo, 2019). Recognising the unique benefits of interacting with animals, both Animal-assisted Therapy and Animal-assisted Activity have been implemented in various prison settings worldwide (Villafaina-Dominguez et al., 2020)



In August 2023, the CSD launched an animal-assisted programme to address the psychological needs of PICs. The programme initially targeted female PICs who showed depression, anxiety and stress symptoms as measured by clinical assessment instruments. It began with providing education on dog-caring principles and training practices that involved command-giving, walking and hugging in the indoor gymnasium area or the exercise yard. The programme was first implemented as a small-scale pilot programme and positive results were achieved. PICs generally found the programme **purposeful, stress-reducing, motivating and compassion-promoting**.

With these encouraging outcomes, the programme was further expanded in early 2024. Over 300 female PICs have participated in the programme with **results indicating that participants' psychological distress, including depression, anxiety and stress, was significantly reduced**.



Figure 1. Types of distress that show a significant decrease as a result of participation in the Rehabilitation Dog Services

Dr. Mak: You've said that **building a rehabilitative culture in CSD facilities could start with the implementation of the Rehabilitation Dog Services**. I wonder how our rehabilitation dogs Gina and Echo can take part in promoting a rehabilitative culture?

Dr. Cheung: Animal-assisted Intervention (AAI) has a **unique strength**, as PICs may find **dogs particularly genuine and trustworthy**. With the high prevalence of traumatic experience among PICs, they often lose their trust and confidence in humans. AAI, however, provides PICs with an **alternative source of healthy social interactions**. When PICs interact with rehabilitation dogs, they may find the

process comforting and relieving with no worries about being betrayed or set up.

I also believe that rehabilitation dogs may **promote a trustworthiness perception** in PICs through the **baby face effect**. Research has found that infant-like facial features such as large eyes and small noses tend to **draw human attention, elicit positive emotions and help establish attachment**. Rapport and trust building usually take time, which facilitate reciprocal understanding between a therapist and a client. Baby-like facial features of rehabilitation dogs **highlight their innocence and harmlessness** from the very first minute of their encounters, thereby helping PICs **let their guard down**. Interactions with rehabilitation dogs under therapeutic guidance also help PICs develop the capacity necessary for healthier interactions, thereby enabling them to truly gain from therapeutic interventions, achieve personal growth in a healthier direction and make positive changes

AAI **can benefit not only PICs but also correctional staff** by creating a supportive and humanistic culture. Such climate helps **mitigate the level of stress** among correctional staff, who work extensively in a highly disciplined and confined environment. AAI can **facilitate the communication between PICs and correctional staff**, as rehabilitation dogs can **act as a bridge** between them by breaking down barriers and lowering their defensiveness.

Dr. Mak: I wholeheartedly agree that our Rehabilitation Dog Services benefit not only PICs but also correctional staff and the entire institution. By fostering a therapeutic environment, these services can **enhance staff-inmate relationships and improve the overall prison dynamics**. I'm thinking whether you have any suggestions on the future development of the Rehabilitation Dog Services?

Dr. Cheung: The implementation of the Rehabilitation Dog Services is an **ongoing journey**. I suggest **expanding the services** to serve more PICs, **particularly those with mental illnesses**. Many of these individuals have experienced stigmas and prejudice from others. PICs requiring psychiatric care may have **less mental capacity and need more preparation or guidance** to better manage their illnesses. The Rehabilitation Dog Services offer these individuals a **non-threatening and more manageable alternative** that helps them to do so. Innocent appearances of rehabilitation dogs and gentle interactions with them provide PICs under psychiatric care a **positive social-emotional experience**. These PICs may feel less judged and more welcomed by the rehabilitation dogs than their human peers. The unique bond with the rehabilitation dogs is likely to provide them with **extra support and facilitates their healing**.

By providing the Rehabilitation Dog Services to PICs, we can study the relative effectiveness of the services **across different groups** and the primary mechanism(s) of change in each group.

Dr. Mak: Thank you for your sharing today. I completely agree that the Rehabilitation Dog Services can foster a positive atmosphere within a correctional institution. When our dogs serve as “**animal staff**”, they can create a significant impact on the rehabilitative culture. Is there anything that you would like to tell our readers before ending the interview?

Dr. Cheung: The initial trial on the Rehabilitation Dog Services has proved highly successful. The potential returns are not limited to short-term results. Long-term gains such as **better reintegration** and **lower recidivism** may be achievable. Expanding and refining the Rehabilitation Dog Services is certainly worthwhile, as it can bring lasting positive changes **within and beyond the prison walls**. It is imperative for service planners to consider investing in the services and strategically map out the future development.

The Rehabilitation Dog Services not only benefit PICs but also **improve workplace well-being** in correctional facilities. Rehabilitation dogs can help alleviate staff members’ stress from working in a highly disciplined setting, thereby **reducing the risks of burnout or ineffective communication**. The Rehabilitation Dog Services can help **cultivate a positive rehabilitative culture across CSD facilities**. **Rigorous and well-planned research strategies** are crucial to guiding the evolution of the services. It’s my honour to work alongside with such an enthusiastic and passionate team. I look forward to taking on this journey and promoting a rehabilitative culture together.

Insights

1. “Baby Face Effect” of dogs

The “baby face effect” refers to the phenomenon where certain facial features—such as large eyes, a round face, and a small nose—are perceived as youthful and innocent. This effect can easily be observed in dogs. Breeds with juvenile traits elicit caring and nurturing responses from people.

2. Rehabilitation Dogs as Non-Human Staff

Rehabilitation dogs act as non-human staff members that help lower PICs’ defences, as PICs often feel more guarded around people. Their gentle and approachable nature fosters a sense of safety and comfort, encouraging positive interactions between PICs and staffs.

3. Rehabilitation Dogs Improve Overall Prison Dynamics

The presence of Rehabilitation Dogs can foster a more positive and engaging work environment, leading to increased job satisfaction and stress reduction among correctional staffs.

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