Bridging Cultural and Disciplinary Boundaries in Human-Animal Interactions
IAHAIO Annual Symposium, 24-26 July 2014
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

SUMMARY OF WORKSHOPS

The introduction of IAHAIO’s new annual symposium included two days of workshops, which gave delegates the opportunity to discuss important current issues in the field of HAI. Four main topics formed the basis for the workshops, where delegates were invited to address specific questions that had been put forward for discussion by members of the Symposium Planning committee, drawn from the IAHAIO membership base. Ninety two delegates representing 20 countries participated in the workshops. Key themes and suggested action points emerged from these very lively and fruitful discussions, which are summarized here.

Workshop 1: Terminology in AAI

The IAHAIO White paper Definitions for Animal Assisted Intervention and Animal Assisted Activity and Guidelines for Wellness of Animals Involved was circulated to delegates in advance of the workshops and formed the basis for discussion in this workshop. There was wide acceptance of the definitions put forward by IAHAIO and some helpful feedback on amending some of the language and providing more precise examples to underpin the terminologies, all of which will be incorporated in the updated version of the White Paper, available shortly.

Approaches to implementation dominated much of this workshop and there was a view that this posed some challenges as there is some resistance in the field regarding quality standards, due to fear of restrictions to activities that might arise. However, some excellent suggestions were put forward as to how we may work to ensure that these definitions and terminologies are adopted at local, regional and international level. It was clear that a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach is the way forward, with IAHAIO members promoting the use of the definitions within their networks, to include also educators, animal trainers, journalists, media contacts, insurance companies as well as at a broader level with government circles, where possible. This could take place through many channels, such as website distribution, workshops, training courses, publication of studies, informing the professional and public audience of the IAHAIO terminologies, thereby promoting their acceptance more widely.

The importance of ensuring that animal welfare needs are addressed in AAI was emphasized by many delegates and it was suggested that those with species-specific specialist knowledge should always be involved and consulted in AAI programmes and be invited to adopt the IAHAIO approach. Diversity in laws, codes and regulations in different countries which may influence the delivery of AAI was acknowledged and it was proposed that the IAHAIO White Paper could form the principles upon which more detailed codes of practice and procedure manuals could be developed in different countries which still comply with local laws and regulations. IAHAIO would manage the official translation process of the definitions to other languages if requested by its member organisations, and would do so in collaboration with specialist translation services and its full membership base.
Workshop 2: Best practices and standards in AAI

There was general agreement that best practice in AAI is one in which the needs and abilities of all involved – people, animals and clients - are addressed, through safety, health, training, assessment of suitability, appropriate frequency of the intervention and a dynamic approach through ongoing review. Identifying acceptable standards for education and training for those delivering AAI generated much discussion, given the diversity in approach that currently exists, for example professional vs volunteer (or blended) delivery; AAA vs AAT; vocational and experiential learning vs formal, theoretical or profession-based learning. How do we decide what is the right professional education for an AAI professional? was a key question for consideration by the workshop delegates. Some suggested that we adopt a split between animal handler vs therapist and consider essential qualifications for each role. The importance of ensuring that dogs in AAI receive appropriate training based on positive reinforcement, rather than punitive training methods, was emphasized. Some delegates were of the view that every professional involved in whatever discipline is potentially suitable when combined with AAI animal handlers.

There was a desire for an international approach to accreditation of education and training standards for AAI through the creation of criteria of competencies at regional/national levels, which could then be recognized internationally by organisations such as IAHAIO or international multidisciplinary teams. The ongoing review and controlled regulation of AAI work would require a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach whereby insurance companies and other key stakeholders would be invited to participate in discussions around accreditation requirements. Adherence to a code of conduct would be essential and it is likely that self-regulation on a voluntary basis would be an acceptable first step before moving towards obligatory accreditation.

The IAHAIO White Paper on Definitions could play an important role here in providing an overarching framework for the development of standards – it was felt that more work was needed on the White Paper to ensure that it encompasses the diversity of AAI delivery, addresses any aspects that are incompatible with other mainstream approaches currently available, and provides more details on specific therapies.

Specific points were made about how we can encourage more insurance companies to recognise – and list as a benefit in insurance cover – AAI services. Although this may be challenging, some useful suggestions were offered including collaborating more closely with insurers, asking them what they need and educating them about AAI, using specific pilot budget provided by insurance companies, and more generally, helping to further legitimize the field and its importance by supporting accredited training approaches, documenting outcomes in a systematic way, and promoting research in the field.

Workshop 3: Developing a global database

There was some excitement expressed by delegates at the at the possibility of creating a global database for HAI and many delegates stated the benefits that this would bring, such as: It would provide credibility to AAI practice and programmes, place value on pilot studies, increase sample sizes and provide an avenue for professionals to have access to preliminary data to include in research proposals. It would create a universal tool for outcome measures and provide essential data and information to support discussions and proposals put to policymakers and governments. To improve on existing solutions to sharing data, this HAI database would need to include a material and methods section with standards and requirements, but not strict prerequisites because valuable information can be lost in this way. Both qualitative and quantitative data would be included. The data capture should include outcomes of HAI for people/clients, as well as the animal counterpart (e.g. behaviour studies, stress indicators or doing HAI work). Consistent documentation across countries and associations that practice HAI would need to be adopted to ensure similarities across study designs. It was suggested that IAHAIO could create a universal scale or that an existing valid and reliable scale be used for all populations and fields within HAI as a starting point.
Delegates helpfully considered some of the detailed practicalities in establishing and using the global database, including:

- Who would have access to the database? Open access is not favoured, but there can be variability on the level of availability of the data which may involve registering with IAHAIO in some way. This would be supported by legal agreement.

- What happens if someone publishes an article using (my) data before (I) have a chance to do so myself? Only a portion of the data would be shared; it wouldn’t all be available. Agreements and consent would be established upfront. Participation is voluntary so researchers wouldn’t have to share their data.

- How will versioning be handled? – by agreement and a system would be in place.

Delegates also acknowledged some of the challenges about using or contributing to a global HAI database, including the lack of universal instruments for data collection, bridging the gap between researchers and practitioners, diverse practice standards across countries and contexts, no current standards for measuring outcomes. Importantly, the need to better define terminologies and definitions and ‘speak the same language’ was re-iterated, which brought discussions full circle to the first workshop on Terminology in AAI.

**Workshop 4: Achieving sustainability in HAI/AAI programmes**

Workshop delegates identified key components for achieving longevity and success for HAI/AAI programmes as: funding, proof and documentation of benefits, continuous education and training, adherence to standards and ethics in line with a code of conduct, research, strong networks with policy makers, insurance companies, media, practitioners and professionals in animal and human sciences. Maintaining sustainable funding and income streams was also acknowledged as one of the biggest threats or challenges to long-term survival and success, as well as any potential compromises in welfare for both human and animal participants. Delegates highlighted the importance of working together rather than against competitive services and why a register of certified practitioners and certified animals who are regularly evaluated was crucial to credibility and longevity. Approaches to planning, organisation and communication, including cultural awareness and promotion of AAI more widely, were also discussed. Delegates spoke about the wider role organisations have in securing longevity and success in terms of providing lectures and workshops for educating practitioners from different disciplines on the work of AAI and specific programmes they deliver. This can be accomplished through e-learning for the theoretical components, local workshops and collaborations with corporate sponsors and organisations.

IAHAIO extends thanks to all delegates who participated as well as the workshop facilitators.

**Workshop facilitators**

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