Author's response to reviews

Title: Patient benefit of dog-assisted interventions in health care: A systematic review

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Answers to reviewers comments

First of all we would like to thank the reviewers for good and interesting comments that have helped us to improve our manuscript. Below are our answers, presented point-by-point, which in detail describes the adjustments we have made to the manuscript.

Reviewer 1

1. Please write keyword according MeSH and alphabetic order.

The key words are now presented in alphabetic order. In addition to the previous stated key words we also added a number of key word according to MeSH. This can be viewed in the “key words” section, page 3, lines 49-52.

2. Abbreviations in incomprehensive.

Thank you for this comment. The list of abbreviations has been reviewed and updated. Please see the “abbreviation” section, page 17-18, lines 382-405.

3. Write difference of psychiatric changes in different studies, write dose, treatment period, and type of administration in tables.

Treatment period and type of administration are presented in table 3. Information about differences in outcome are presented in table 4 (summery of outcomes from studies included in the review). In our view it is not appropriate to present numeric values of all the different
outcome measures as it will be a very messy table. However, to clarify where the information can be found we have made an additional explanation in the “outcome” section, page 9, lines 206-207.

4. Write the psychiatric similarities between dog and human.

We thank the reviewer for an interesting remark but found it out of the scope of this study to write the psychiatric similarities between dogs and humans.

5. Change the manuscript title according to text body: psychiatric…

We agree that the majority of patients in the included studies have psychiatric related disorders. However, the aim of the study was broader and our search had no limitation to specific health conditions. Therefore, we think the proposed change of title will lead to a too narrow and misleading title.

Reviewer 2

1. As the study conducted from the databases, keywords play an important role for someone to cross verify and to perform the study in the future. I feel certain level of inclusion in the main text about search criteria is necessary. This will answer how a huge number of articles are excluded from the study. Otherwise it looks biased. To say the authors have selected few articles to prove their hypothesis rather than investigating the real hidden truth.

Thank you for this comment. We agree. To clarify this we have inserted table 1 (presented in the additional file 1) in the “search methods for identification of studies” section page 5, line 113. We have also clarified the main reason for early exclusion which explains the majority of articles excluded. Please see the “Result of the search” section on page 7, line 161.

2. The discussion it infers/ or it might mislead that in control group there was no treatment for the disease. This has to be clarified in discussion. Because along with the DAT or DAA or for that matter DAS, whether treatment for the actual disease is given or not? If the treatment is not given how ethical is the study?

In table 3 we present the interventions that the experimental group and the control group received. We agree that it is possible to misunderstand whether the control group received treatment for their actual disease in cases where we have stated “no treatment”. To reduce the risk for misunderstanding we have changed “no treatment” too “no active intervention”, see table 3, page 23. To clarify that the control group also received treatment we have added an explanation regarding this in the “discussion” section, page 15, lines 342-343.

3. In the inclusion criteria why 20 subject was mentioned? Why not 19? Is it decided after collection of data or before the literature search from the databases? Similarly for other criteria for inclusion. If this is not answered then it looks more biased. It implies that the conclusion made prior to arrival of results.
We agree that the inclusion criteria’s needed to be clarified. Hence, we have made a number of changes in the “selection of studies” section on page 5-6, lines 116-120. An important reason why the choice of study objects was determined to be “at least 20 study subjects” were the risk of biased results in studies investigating fewer study subjects. This is of course an arbitrary assumption, and we discuss the weaknesses regarding this in the “discussion” section on page 16, lines 360-363. Besides that we have added an additional statement regarding weaknesses due to inclusion criteria’s in the “discussion” section, page 16, lines 363-366.

4. Another important statement given is many number of articles are excluded based on poor quality. What are these poor quality, how it was decided? It should be included in the main article than the supplement.

To determine the quality of the articles traditional criteria for judgment of scientific quality received from two different handbooks were used, stated in the “review of quality” section on page 6, lines 137-140. To clarify this, additional criteria’s previous only stated in appendix, is now also included in the main article in the “review of quality section”, page 6, lines 137-139. To clarify it further we have also stated how an article were determined to be of high, moderate or low quality in the “review of quality” section, page 6, line 140-144.

5. How the effect was decided mild to moderate in all the articles studied? What are the criteria for these mild to moderate effects?

Thank you for a relevant comment. We agree that this is not totally clear. As your questions suggests there were no specific criteria’s for the assessment of the effects. The conclusion were done from our coherent assessment of the studies analyzed in the review. To clarify this we have made some changes in the “conclusion” section on page 2, line 44 and page 16, line 368.

6. References cited wrongly for many. It should be cross checked and rectified.

The references and the reference list have been reviewed and corrected.

7. Apart from all these the language has to be cross checked with experts. I feel at places it require some modification, few examples of the sentences, page number 10 "Three of the included studies studied patients in child and adolescent psychiatry [21, 22, 24]," Page number 9 "In the study by Bono et al. the control group received no treatment at all [17]."

Good comment. The language has now been reviewed by a person who has English as native language.