

Conclusion

It is essential that in any Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) programme, the health and welfare of both the humans and the animals involved should be the primary consideration. However, due to the unique circumstances under which DAT takes place, we believe it is not only ineffective as a therapeutic intervention but could be harmful to human participants and dolphins alike.

- There is no scientific evidence that DAT is, **at best**, any more effective than any other Animal Assisted Therapy, including those that are cheaper and more readily available.
- DAT has not been demonstrated to have any long-term beneficial impact on those who have attended a programme.
- DAT programmes using captive or wild dolphins expose all participants to serious risk of physical harm and potential risks to health.
- There are no official standards or enforceable guidelines relating to the provision of DAT or its employees.

“It would be irresponsible and professionally unethical to promote or support DAT as an appropriate prescriptive response from the medical community”

(Jonathan Balcombe, PhD. Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine).

Thank you for reading this leaflet

WDCS is unable to condone the practice of Dolphin Assisted Therapy.

We hope this leaflet has been helpful in clarifying why we have adopted this stance, as well as providing vital information for any family and carer/caregiver considering this activity for their loved one.

For further information about DAT and a full report produced by WDCS outlining its findings and concerns about DAT, please visit www.wdcs.org/dat

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WDCS
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DOLPHIN ASSISTED THERAPY



Are you considering Dolphin Assisted Therapy or DAT for a relative or friend?

This leaflet contains important information to help you to make an informed and safe decision on their behalf.

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What is Dolphin Assisted Therapy?

Dolphin Assisted Therapy, or DAT, is an increasingly popular Animal Assisted Therapy made available through a growing number of programmes around the world and marketed as offering a cure or respite from human illness or disability.

DAT involves two **highly vulnerable groups of individuals**. The people undergoing the therapy are often children or adults with psychological or physical disabilities and/or emotional problems and the dolphins used in DAT are either confined in captivity or are part of a wild population that may suffer from human disturbance.



DAT involves vulnerable people and dolphins

Is DAT completely safe?

Dolphins are wild animals and unpredictable, even when well-trained. People have suffered bites, bruises, scratches, abrasions and broken bones as a result of swimming with dolphins. Dolphins are large, strong animals and entering the water with them can present a risk to human health and safety.

Disease transmission is a serious concern, as dolphins can carry diseases that can be transmittable to humans. Although the dolphins may be screened for disease, there may be no legal requirement to do this and some facilities do not have adequate veterinary or husbandry practices in place.

Can I be sure DAT will really work?

Proponents of DAT have claimed it can be used to treat a whole range of physical and psychological conditions. But two independent reviews by senior Emory University scholars demonstrate that there is no proven scientific validity to DAT.

“Despite DAT’s extensive promotion to the general public, the evidence that it produces enduring improvements in the core symptoms of any psychological disorder is nil” (Marino and Lilienfeld 2007). They recommend that **“Both practitioners of DAT and parents who are considering DAT for their children should be made aware that this treatment has yet to be subject to an adequate empirical test”** (Marino & Lilienfeld 1998).

How well regulated is DAT?

We are not aware of any specific regulations governing DAT in the countries where it is conducted. It is therefore not possible for authorities to ensure any health or safety standards in national DAT facilities.

Furthermore, DAT providers are not required to have any specific training or certification and there is no legitimate regulatory body for DAT. Consequently, participants and their families and carers/caregivers have limited opportunity to verify the qualifications, or expertise, of the staff in whose care they place themselves or their loved one.



Standards of health and safety cannot be ensured

DAT can present a significant risk to the health and welfare of dolphins used in the programmes. Their care and conditions may be neither inspected nor regulated.

What are the risks to dolphins?

Dolphins are charismatic animals. Their obvious exuberance and apparent ‘playfulness’ evoke in us feelings of friendship and empathy. **But DAT is not a service concerned with the welfare of dolphins!**



Capture and transport of dolphins can be very cruel

Where do the dolphins come from?

Methods used to capture and transport dolphins can be shockingly cruel and many dolphins die as a result. Wild capture may have significant conservation implications for some species and the impact of captures on the long-term survival of dolphin populations is unknown.

What can life be like for a DAT dolphin?

In captivity, dolphins have a lower survival rate than in the wild. The stress of their confinement prevents them from behaving normally – hunting, breeding, socialising, resting – often making them ill and resulting in premature death.

Betsy Smith was a pioneer of Dolphin Assisted Therapy but in 2003 she denounced it publicly, strongly criticising these activities, stating that

“It is a rather cynical and deceptive practice by dolphinarium and swim-with-programs owners. Some certified therapists with no dolphin knowledge will charge exorbitant fees for treatment that can be done without dolphins... At the heart of all these therapy programs is the exploitation of vulnerable people and vulnerable dolphins” (Betsy Smith 2003).

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Betsy Smith – former pioneer of Dolphin Assisted Therapy