The context
Since 1980, in Belgium as in other countries, the Mental Health Policy tends to limit as much as possible the duration of a stay in a psychiatric hospital. Different measures have been set in order to promote the patient’s psychosocial rehabilitation. But for some patients, this proves to be difficult.

First results confirm the findings of the founders of pet therapy
• A matter of encounters: the project AAT Mistral Gagnant grew as the spontaneous outcome of (partly chance) encounters between people and dogs. The caretakers who initiated it insist on the humane “bounds” and the “trust” that made it possible. (Cl. B. Lavrovin, 1962, «The Dog as ‘So-Therapist’»)
• Systemic changes: according its initiators, the project remediated the nursing staff and renewed their motivation: “the atmosphere of the whole ward has changed” (Cl. C. S & E. Carson, 1975, A Pet-facilitated Psychotherapy in a hospital setting)
• Patients as actors of the project: the patients themselves took part in the setting of the project, including the choice of the puppies (Cl. C. D. Lowe, 1984, «Companion Animals in Institutions»)

The project “AAT Mistral Gagnant”
Two dogs have been introduced in an open psychiatric ward (the “Trieux”), one as a resident dog and the other one as a visiting dog. Around twenty male patients, with psychiatric disorders, live at the Trieux. Some of them have a long history of mental hospital, while others, younger and more motivated patients arrived more recently. All of them suffer from psychiatric symptoms (hallucinations and delusions) in spite of medication. Some of them have also negative symptoms (flat affect, social withdrawal...). The dogs arrived during the summer of 2010. The nursing staff’s aim was to introduce them both within the community daily life of the ward and within individual treatment plans. According to them, the puppies needed some obedience and socialization training and the patients, for their part, needed to learn how to behave appropriately towards the animals. It was also obvious that some patients could benefit from a participation in the training of the dog. Between five and eight patients volunteered to participate in the program.

What the ethnography study showed so far
• Active or sensitive way of getting in touch with the dogs – Some patients get involved in the project in a very active way: they take part in walks, go to the vet with the dog, or go to the dog’s trainer in center. Other patients prefer a more sensitive way that implies their emotional and sensorial life.
• Attachment roots – Reciprocal attachment tie develops between the dogs and the patients through touch, gaze and mutual gaze, affectionate words and gentle gestures. When they are in touch with the dogs, patients show real attentiveness to them.
• Emotional life – The presence of the dogs seems to increase the patient’s emotional life. It reminds them good and bad memories. As a patient said: “I hope he (the caretaker) will never abandon her (the dog)”. The dog also brings memories of childhood companions that proved to be affectionate and faithful, and of past life in the country.
• The dog as stimulating the search of meaning – The dog is also a mirror that helps the patient questioning himself about his life and his illness. When a dog underwent minor surgery, a patient asked: “Is it (the illness) innate? And after a while: “And psychis, is it innate?”
• Social cognition, empathy and common ground – The dog may be the support of social cognition and empathy. The dogs are recognized as subjects in the interactive network of the community. They become the support of joint attention between the patients and the nursing staff and some common grounds between them may be established from there. Patient, looking at a dog apparently making a bad dream: “I don’t like when she has nightmares.”
• Neither do I: answers a nurse. They both agree that they should wake the dog up. Being treated as subjective agents by the nursing staff and by the patients, the dogs, for their part, fit into inter-subjective relationships. (Cl. Sanders C., 1999. Understanding Dogs. Living and working with Canine Companions)

Taking the dogs to the obedience training: social rehabilitation, self-confidence and emotional learning

• Social rehabilitation: the activities are the most relevant for the social dimension of the project. Once a week, three or four patients go out of the hospital and mix with “normal” dog owners for training of the dogs.
• Self-confidence: the dog trainer doesn’t know anything about mental illness. During the obedience training sessions, he treats the patients in (nearly) the same way as he treats normal people; he is about as demanding with them as he is with other people. So when the patients do reach the trainer’s objectives, the nursing staff might be as pleasantly surprised as the patients themselves are. In 2012, 3 patients and dogs passed the official Belgian obedience test along with 30 “normal” dog owners. Of course this has a positive impact on their self-confidence.
• Emotional learning: According to the nursing staff, during the dog’s training sessions the patients learn to regulate their emotions and/or to show more appropriate emotions. How is it so?

Conclusions
The training sessions further the patient’s self-esteem and self-confidence. They foster their emotional adjustment to the requirements of the situation and their understanding of their own emotions.

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