

# Dolphin-assisted therapy

**SCAS Head of Operations and Development Julia Dando recently had the opportunity of visiting the Caribbean-based Curacao Dolphin Therapy & Research Center and exploring their work. Here, she shares her observations of the programme and her thoughts on the experience.**

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Swimming with dolphins is something that many people have on their lifelong 'bucket list' – the activity does have some magical charm about it for many, not least those spurred on by some dubious movies watched as children and a certain amount of propoganda about what makes a dolphin so

'special'. Indeed, some countries in the world have declared dolphins to be 'nonhuman people' and have afforded them the same 'rights' as human people (although it could be argued that there are many in this world that treat humans far worse than they would treat any other animal).





We've seen and heard many a horror story in world media about dolphins and other sea mammals in captivity and even worse stories of how they get there. It is entirely understandable then, that many believe dolphins should not be in captivity in any way and it is accepted that there are many instances of disrepute within the field where cruelty and abuse occur. This is not, however, restricted to dolphins or other sea mammals and is sadly widespread among all species.

This article is not to debate or judge on these aspects of controversy. This article is intended to present some facts and detail about one specific programme and to provide an account of my observations of their work in a way that balances both objective and subjective views.

## The Curacao Dolphin Therapy & Research Center

The Curacao Dolphin Therapy & Research Center (CDTC) was founded in 2004 and is located on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao. I had been aware of the organisation for a few years and, having watched some of their promotional material and read about their work, it was one of the few dolphin-assisted therapy centres that, for me, showed that their approach was client-centred and that the dolphins really formed only a single part of a larger and more holistic approach to providing therapy to a client. The dolphins were not labelled as a panacea or mythical creature with magical 'healing powers'. They were however recognised as an important and effective catalyst to engaging a client and helping them towards a set of therapeutic goals and outcomes.

## About the programme

The dolphin-assisted therapy programme caters for 12 to 16 families at any one time as a maximum capacity, and families come from a variety of locations around the world. The majority of clients come from the Netherlands and Germany (Curacao is part of the Kingdom of The Netherlands even though it is in the Caribbean and is otherwise known as The Netherlands Antilles – its residents are considered to be Dutch). The centre has liaison teams in Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden, the US and Canada.

Because the cost of attending the programme is relatively high compared to other therapeutic interventions, joining the programme is often something that people seek after they have explored many other therapeutic interventions and options. Travel alone presents both a financial and a physical challenge for many clients, with flights from Europe often taking nine or 10 hours in flight and costing anything up to 1000Euros each. Families will often raise their own funds to bring their children to CDTC and can be extremely resourceful in doing so. There are some foundations that clients can apply to for funds, including DolphinAid in Germany.

Clients that visit the centre have a wide range of conditions including varying degrees of emotional and behavioural conditions as well as physical disabilities and illnesses. There are few limitations in respect to preventative conditions and the team can cope with quite severe disabilities; they have helped clients of all ages up to 60 years old.

Applications to join the programme are usually made by parents or other family members and are always

accompanied by supporting documentation and approval from the client's doctor(s). Each therapy programme is generally two weeks in length, with some exceptions.

At the beginning of each week, on the Monday, time is allocated to assess and plan the goals of the programme and the interventions that will be used within it. It is important for all parties that realistic and achievable goals are agreed with input from the family as well as from the therapists.

Therapy takes place during the week, Monday to Friday. At weekends the centre provides family experiences. The therapeutic team work in a very holistic fashion with regards to the family. They recognise that the whole family is often in need of some therapeutic help and support. Many have had some really tough times getting through various challenges and have often spent their lives dedicated to the family member that is in most need of the therapy. The programme can therefore offer a welcome intervention for the whole family.

As well as receiving support from the team, families also benefit from the peer support they receive from other families staying at the centre and these connections often continue after the programme has finished and the clients return home.

There is also a siblings' programme that runs alongside and also supports the centre's holistic family approach to therapy, by helping to include siblings in receiving benefit from the programme. This aspect was developed to support siblings who might experience their own emotional and mental strain as a result of the heightened attention that is often given to the needs of the client (their brother or sister). The siblings' programme helps to keep a cohesive family approach to the therapy, which again continues when the family returns home.

## A typical day

A typical therapy day will include two hours spent with the family. This is generally split into 30 minutes in the classroom taking part in activities that will be dependent upon the goals for the client, one hour in the water with a dolphin, and 30 minutes showering and dressing.

The day will also include a debrief that will provide tips on how to take their therapeutic experience and make it transferrable into their lives back home. Obviously the client will not have a dolphin at home, will not have access to many of the environmental aspects or opportunities at home, so it is a very high priority for the team to work closely with the families sharing tips and skills that are

transferrable to life at home. Most families leave not only with new tools to use but also a new enthusiasm to engage with them.

Extra time is given to those that need it and being a residential programme it allows additional social engagement opportunities and activities. The environment itself also offers benefits being set in a sunny, beautiful Caribbean island.

Safety is of the highest priority and this includes every aspect of the programme, the environment, the team and the clients.

The therapeutic elements of the programme in the water are generally delivered using a diamond or star model. It is a multidisciplinary approach. There will be a therapist, an intern who is studying or has completed studies in a therapeutic subject, the dolphin, the dolphin's trainer and the client.

The therapist always accompanies the client in the water and, depending on the client's condition and level of disability, there may also be additional supporter in the water. For safety, no family member is allowed in the water with the client.

## A personal perspective

It was agreed that I would visit the centre twice, the first time to speak with Esther Koojiman, the head trainer, and Heike Ervenich, the head therapist, and then to return on a subsequent day to watch some therapeutic sessions taking place in the water.

After our discussion on the first visit, when we talked at length about the programme, animal welfare and the work that the centre does, I was unexpectedly invited to return in the afternoon to experience being in the water with the dolphins myself. Whilst entirely unexpected it was a welcome offer and I accepted. I didn't know at this stage what relevance my own experience of being in the water with the dolphins would have on my experience of viewing the therapy later in the week but it did have a significant part to play. This is also why I felt it important to include it as part of this article.

I was quite nervous about being in the water with the dolphins, mostly because I was experiencing a bit of anxiety that I would somehow hurt them. I had never been close to a dolphin and had never touched one, so I had no idea of what to expect. We were briefed by Esther about how to behave around the dolphins – not to hold their fin, to keep hands close to the body in order to avoid fingers poking



them in wrong places or damaging their skin with nails, to be extra careful of vulnerable areas including their eyes and blow hole. I remember wondering how well someone with less control over their limbs might be able to achieve this. As I spent more time in the water I recognised that the dolphins were not made of thin glass and they would not break if I touched them.

We were instructed to place the flat of our hands on the side of the dolphin and to let the dolphin lead. The dolphin would recognise my strength and adjust his speed to me. Nonetheless I tried to keep up and Papito felt quite strong under my hand. I was told not to try and keep up; if he was going too fast I should let him go on as this would help him to judge my speed and strength.

We were shown a number of cues to give Papito and he performed a number of activities with us. I couldn't help likening it to dog training although that seemed a somehow inappropriate comparison.

I experienced conflicting emotions during the experience. Papito would often look me in the eye and you certainly felt like there was a conscious, thinking 'person' in there, much like we do when we look into the eyes of our pets. Something unexpected whilst being in the water was an overwhelming feeling of what I can only describe as gratitude towards Papito. I felt incredibly humbled.

However the most valuable part of the in-water experience wasn't going to become clear until later in the week when I would be watching the dolphins with clients in therapy sessions.

## Therapy in action

On the day that I visited to watch the therapy there were three children, two with varying degrees of autism and one with a behavioural condition relating to extreme fear and anxiety. There was also a paraplegic man in his 50s.

We were able to meet some of the family members of the clients and chat to them while we watched the sessions. All had very positive things to say about their children's progress as a result of the therapeutic programme at the centre. Some of them expressed that it had had a profound impact upon their family that no other therapeutic intervention had been able to achieve close to.

While watching the dolphins with these clients I noticed something hugely significant.

When I had been in the water two days earlier it had felt

like the dolphins were performing their activities for us – going through their routine – responding to the cues and performing the 'trick' for want of a better word. What I saw when they were working with these clients was something very different. Yes, the trainer would give the cue, and the dolphin would perform his task – but – the client was not always able to respond in the same way that I did. I had been given instruction on what to do to elicit the desired response from the dolphin and I did it. These clients could not always do that. And the response from the dolphin was not to disengage and return to trainer as one might expect, instead the dolphin started to explore ways to engage with the client.

What had felt like a strong, powerful animal under my able hand was now clearly, as he had been trained to be, extremely gentle and engaging with the client at a level that was appropriate for that client. The only way I can describe it was as though the dolphin was cognitively looking for ways to get a positive response from the person. Did this, against everything in my better knowledge, put the dolphin at least partly into the role of the therapist? It's an interesting point for debate.

It was clear that each of the clients found the experience enjoyable and they appeared to be very connected to the dolphin and the activities. It was easy to see how attending this programme would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the whole family – although some 60–70% of families do indeed return.

## Conclusions

My personal conclusions from this experience were that dolphin-assisted therapy has the potential, like many other AAIs, to be extremely effective for a variety of conditions as part of a wider therapeutic approach. I can't speak for any other programme or centre than the one that I visited but can hand on heart say that what I witnessed at CDTC was a highly professional and passionate team, who clearly worked within an ethical and moral framework in terms of the clients, their families, the multidisciplinary team and the dolphins.

I spent some time quizzing Esther and Heike on many welfare aspects including where the dolphins came from, how they identify stress or fatigue in the dolphins, provide veterinary care, and provide enrichment for the dolphins. Whilst there isn't scope for all the details in this article I was left feeling sure that these four dolphins were happy, healthy dolphins that were expertly cared for both physically and mentally.

As with all animal-assisted therapy and all species I can only accept that there will be both good and bad examples to observe throughout the world. This one, in my opinion, was a positive example of a very good programme and effective therapeutic intervention.



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