

# Pets for healing

**P**FIZER Animal Health, an international leader in the advancement of animal health, and the American Humane Association, the leading advocate on behalf of children and animals in the US, announced the completion of the first round of an innovative research study on the benefits of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) on paediatric cancer patients and their families.

For years, doctors, veterinarians, and other caregivers have shared experiences about the healing power that animal-assisted therapy offers children with cancer.

However, little hard evidence exists as to whether these claims could be substantiated, under what conditions AAT is most effective, and how, if proven useful, it may best be incorporated into treatment.

The research study *Canines and Childhood Cancer: Examining the Effects of Therapy Dogs with Childhood Cancer Patients and their Families*, is a multi-year effort taking place in hospital settings across the US that will examine the specific medical, behavioural, and mental health benefits AAT may have for children with cancer and their families.

A comprehensive literature review has been completed as a first step, and may be downloaded at: [www.CaninesAndChildhoodCancer.org](http://www.CaninesAndChildhoodCancer.org).

"The literature review was conducted to inform the research plan and design for the remainder of the effectiveness study, and to provide a resource to help understand the current status of human-animal interaction research within this domain," said Michael McFarland, group director, Veterinary Operations, Companion Animals, US Pfizer Animal Health.

In addition to the literature review, focus groups and interviews were conducted with hospital staff, family caregivers and AAT handlers, to glean vital information regarding childhood cancer epidemiology and treatment, the well-being of patients and families who are affected by childhood cancer, the applications of AAT for various populations in need, the state of AAT effectiveness research, and the considerations that need to be made when incorporating therapy animals into clinical settings.

Findings from the literature review, focus groups and interviews will help guide the design of the overall study.

Preliminary findings showed that no standard protocol for an AAT session (ie length, number and type of participants in each session, session activities, or talking points) seemed to exist at any of the

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research hospital sites; each animal-handler team went about their work somewhat differently.

This finding underlines the need for this study to develop consistent AAT treatment fidelity across sites in order to conduct the type of rigorous research needed in the human-animal interaction field.

The information gathered during this initial phase will serve to inform a scientific study design in order to conduct a pilot trial with three to five paediatric oncology sites across the country.

Upon the conclusion of the pilot trial, researchers anticipate the launch of a full clinical trial across multiple sites for 12-18 months.

During this time, certified therapy dogs and their handlers will conduct regular AAT sessions with paediatric oncology patients and their families, which will be evaluated by a range of biological, psychological and social measures.

"Now we begin the important work of validating and quantifying something that we have observed and felt for years through our

own experiences - that interaction with animals can provide beneficial effects for people in need of comfort, encouragement and healing," said Dr Robin R. Ganzert, president and chief executive officer of the American Humane Association.

Results from the study will be widely disseminated through professional conferences and peer-reviewed journals in a diverse range of disciplines, including veterinary medicine, paediatric oncology, social work, and animal-assisted therapy.

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