



Major Study: Therapy Dogs Can Help Families Of Children With Cancer

(NAPS)—Dogs have long been called Mankind's best friend, but a major new scientific study now indicates that a dog may also be a family's best friend in times of their greatest need.

Following seven years of pioneering research, American Humane, the country's first national humane organization, revealed the results of its long-awaited "Canines and Childhood Cancer Study," the first and largest randomized, controlled clinical trial to rigorously measure the effects of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) in the field of pediatric oncology. The results, published in the *Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing*, show that regular visits from a therapy dog can provide significant psychosocial benefits to families of children undergoing treatment for cancer.

The data indicates a range of positive effects: Disease-related worry and anxiety among patients who had regular visits from therapy dogs remained stable, while children in the control group became significantly more worried over the course of the study. Parents in the treatment group reported that their children had significant improvements in school functioning, and data shows improved communication within families as well as between parents and medical staff, which can lead to better medical care, and reductions in their levels of stress, specifically as it relates to their emotional functioning.

In 2010 American Humane researchers, with funding from Zoetis, began the study to rigorously measure the effects of AAT for children with cancer, their parents, and the therapy dogs who visit them. The study employed a range of physiological and/or psychological measures to assess stress, anxiety, and health-related quality of life among patients and their parents.

"When designing the study, we intentionally sought to establish a rigorous challenge and demonstrate that multi-centered, prospective, placebo-controlled studies are possible in the area of animal-assisted therapy," said J. Michael McFarland, DVM, DABVP, Executive Director, U.S. Companion Animal Marketing at Zoetis. "The Canines and Childhood Cancer Study addressed one of the most difficult challenges in this area—assessing the impact of therapy dogs in helping children suffering from a severe illness. The results give us important insights into the power of the



A therapy dog can make life easier for children with cancer and their families.

human-animal bond and will inform future research in this area."

American Humane researchers also worked to gauge the effects of such interventions on the therapy dogs, measuring the level of the stress hormone cortisol in the dogs' saliva. The data show that participating therapy dogs showed no signs suggesting the activities caused distress or harmed the welfare of the animals. Funds to study the effects on the therapy dogs were received through a grant from the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI). These findings are published in *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*.

"This research project is important because now we have strong evidence that with proper training and handling, the welfare of therapy animals in hospital settings is not adversely impacted," said HABRI Executive Director Steven Feldman. "In addition to these promising findings, it is important for therapy animal organizations, handlers and the health care facilities where they serve to meet high standards of care and welfare for the animals involved."

"This study is an important step forward in identifying and understanding perhaps underused weapons in the war on childhood cancer," said Dr. Robin Ganzert, American Humane's president and CEO. "After years of anecdotal evidence pointing to its effectiveness, we were finally able to examine in a rigorous manner the scientific underpinning of the benefits of animal-assisted therapy on families of children with cancer. We hope this examination will spur further rigorous research and eventually the increased use of this accessible adjunctive therapy providing invaluable help and support to the families of more than 10,000 children diagnosed with cancer each year."