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The effects of animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) for pediatric oncology patients and their parents at five hospital sites

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Purpose: While anecdotal evidence underscores the positive impact of therapy dogs for children with cancer and their families, rigorous studies of efficacy are currently lacking, even as animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) occur daily in today's pediatric oncology settings. This national, multi-site study is the first of its kind to rigorously measure the psychosocial effects of AAIs for this population. Specifically, researchers are interested in whether or not AAIs have positive effects on patient stress, anxiety and health-related quality of life and on parent stress and anxiety, as well as whether or not therapy dogs experience distress during AAI sessions.

Methods: Patients, aged 3-17 years and recently diagnosed with cancer, and their parents are randomly selected to receive either their standard of care treatment for their diagnosis only or their standard of care plus regular, 15 minute visits from a registered therapy dog and handler in the outpatient clinic or inpatient unit. Both study cohorts participate for 4 months by completing psychosocial and behavioral instruments at designated intervals. Children also have their blood pressure and pulse measured at the beginning and end of each session.

Results: Since 2014, 49 patients/families and 31 therapy dog-handler teams have been enrolled across the 5 study sites. Preliminary patient, parent, and therapy dog findings will be presented, as well as lessons regarding successfully implementing AAIs in pediatric oncology settings. Data collection for this study will continue through late 2015.

Anticipated findings from this groundbreaking research will increase access to therapy dogs in hospital environments, inform AAI best practices and standards in the context of serious pediatric illness and, most importantly, improve well-being outcomes for children and families facing the considerable challenges of childhood cancer.

Biography

McCullough serves as the National Director of Humane Research and Therapy at American Humane Association. Her responsibilities encompass the promotion of this modality nationwide to benefit our nation's most vulnerable in specialized settings such as children's hospitals and military family camps. She is the Principal Investigator for the Canines and Childhood Cancer Research Study and is a licensed Animal-Assisted Therapy Instructor and Evaluator. Amy holds a master's degree from Queens University of Charlotte and a doctoral degree from the University of Denver with a focus in developing research to demonstrate the efficacy of animal-assisted therapy.

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