Clinical Trial Shows Benefits of Animal-Assisted Therapy in Adult Cancer Patients Undergoing Complex Cancer Treatment with Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy

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Findings Published in Journal of Community and Supportive Oncology Are First to Show Improvement in Emotional Well-Being and Quality of Life

Trial Conducted at Mount Sinai Beth Israel with Support from The Good Dog Foundation, Zoetis and Pfizer Foundation

New York, NY – January 13, 2015 — Therapy dogs may improve the emotional well-being of some cancer patients, according to results of a clinical study, the first to document the benefits of animal-assisted therapy in adult cancer patients. The research was made available this week in the Journal of Community and Supportive Oncology.

The study, conducted by researchers at Mount Sinai Beth Israel, found that patients receiving intensive multi-modal concomitant radiation therapy and chemotherapy for gastrointestinal, head or neck cancers experienced increases in emotional well-being and quality of life when they received visits from a certified therapy dog during the course of their treatment. Increases in emotional well-being were significant over the course of the animal-assisted visits, even as patients underwent marked and significant declines in both physical and functional well-being. The research was supported by The Good Dog Foundation, the leading provider of professionally trained, fully certified and supervised volunteer therapy dog teams; Zoetis, a leading global animal health company; and the Pfizer Foundation.

“This study is the first such definitive study in cancer, and it highlights the merits of animal-assisted visits using the same scientific standards as we hold for the cancer treatment itself. It shows the importance of an innovative environmental intervention during cancer treatment,” said Stewart B. Fleishman, MD, principal investigator and Founding Director of Cancer Supportive Services at Mount Sinai Beth Israel. “Having an animal-assisted visit significantly improved their quality of life and ‘humanized’ a high-tech treatment,” he said. “Patients said they would have stopped their treatments before completion, except for the presence of the certified Good Dog Foundation therapy dog and volunteer handler.”

An Emerging Role for Animal-Assisted Therapy

Identification of a creative tool to boost patients’ emotional state, especially in face of the high symptom burden for patients receiving concurrent radiation therapy and chemotherapy, underscored the value of an intervention that can be offered in cancer centers nationally and internationally.

“Thanks to this rigorously designed study, we now have strong evidence that pet therapy is an effective tool to help cancer patients get through challenging treatments,” said Gabriel A. Sara, MD, Medical Director, Infusion Suite at Mount Sinai Roosevelt, and Assistant Clinical Professor of Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

“There is mounting evidence in human and veterinary medicine that the emotional bond between people and companion animals can have a positive impact of emotional and physical health,” said J. Michael McFarland, DVM, DABVP, Zoetis group director of Companion Animal Veterinary Operations. “These new results help advance our understanding of the value of animal-assisted therapy in cancer treatment and point to the ways the oncology and animal health communities can work together in supporting cancer patients achieve the best possible treatment outcomes.”

Rachel McPherson, Executive Director and Founder of The Good Dog Foundation added: “We are excited to see the results of this peer-reviewed study, which bears out scientifically what we have seen for more than sixteen years at The Good Dog Foundation, which is that highly trained and fully certified therapy dogs can provide critical healing services to help change cancer patients’ experiences for the better as they receive treatment.”

Study Details

The study assessed the impact of certified therapy animal-assisted visits on quality of life during multi-modal treatment for head and neck and gastrointestinal cancers using a validated and reliable quality of life assessment routinely used in cancer clinical trials.
Forty-two adult patients were enrolled and 37 patients (25 male; 12 female) completed the six-week study, receiving daily 15-to-20-minute animal-assisted visits. The patients had aggressive cancers in the head and neck, and chose rigorous combined chemotherapy and radiation therapy in advance of a smaller than otherwise planned surgery.

Many traveled to Mount Sinai Beth Israel for 30 radiation therapy treatments in addition to scheduled chemotherapy. They were extremely fatigued, frightened and lost weight vital to maintain their strength. Many had feeding tubes, lots of mucus in the mouth and throat and temporarily lost their senses of smell and taste.

Assessments included FACT-G scale were made at baseline, week 3, and end of therapy (7 weeks). Satisfaction with assisted animal visit (AAV) intervention assessed ability to withstand treatment, lingering effect of AAV after treatment and perception of social support.

The 37 patients completed at least baseline and one follow-up assessment for a single group analysis of change over time. Patients underwent marked and significant declines in terms of both physical well-being (overall p < 0.001) and functional well-being (overall p = 0.003).

A similar decline in emotional well-being over that period would have been expected with the cumulative side-effect burdens of treatment. Instead, social well-being showed an increase (overall p = 0.03; p baseline versus week 3 = 0.02; baseline versus week 7, p = 0.04). The means for emotional well-being also showed small increases over time, which were not significant when time was analyzed by itself. After controlling for declines in physical well-being at each time point, the increases in emotional well-being were both statistically significant (overall p - value = 0.004) and clinically meaningful.

To access the study, click here. For more information about animal-assisted therapy, visit www.thegooddogfoundation.org.

Experts available for interview:

- Principal investigator Stewart B. Fleishman, MD
- Gabriel Sara, MD, Medical Director, Infusion Suite at Mount Sinai Roosevelt; Executive Director, Patient Services Initiative, Mount Sinai St. Luke’s and Mount Sinai Roosevelt
- Rachel McPherson, Executive Director and Founder of The Good Dog Foundation

About Good Dog Foundation

The Good Dog Foundation founded in 1998, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit currently operating in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts as well as at disaster sites around the U.S. It is the leading provider of professionally trained, fully certified, and supervised volunteer therapy dog teams serving the Northeastern United States. Good Dog’s quality control, training, team placement, and supervision protocols are widely recognized as setting the national bar for best practices in the industry.

Thousands of teams, each consisting of a dog and human handler, have been certified by Good Dog over the past 16 years to provide exceptional healing services and promote the human-animal therapeutic bond in a positive, medically-proven manner. Good Dog teams are recognized for helping survivors and responders recover from disasters like the attacks of September 11, Sandy Hook, the Boston Marathon bombings, and Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy.

In addition, teams facilitate the teaching of children on the autism spectrum; participate in anti-bullying campaigns; and work with cancer patients undergoing radiation and chemotherapy. In the last year, Good Dog teams visited more than 350 partner facilities and sent more than 1,000 certified teams into the field to make more than 345,000 visits to clients, patients, students, and facility staff. Our goal - through example and advocacy - is to spread awareness nationally of the value of excellence, not merely adequacy, in the delivery of animal-assisted therapy. www.thegooddogfoundation.org

About the Mount Sinai Health System

The Mount Sinai Health System is an integrated health system committed to providing distinguished care, conducting transformative research, and advancing biomedical education. Structured around seven member hospital campuses and a single medical school, the Health System has an extensive ambulatory network and a range of inpatient and outpatient services—from community-based facilities to tertiary and quaternary care. The System includes approximately 6,600 primary and specialty care physicians, 12-minority-owned free-standing ambulatory surgery centers, over 45 ambulatory practices throughout the five boroughs of New York City, Westchester, and Long Island, as well as 31 affiliated community health centers.

Physicians are affiliated with the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, which is ranked among the top 20 medical schools both in National Institutes of Health funding and by U.S. News & World Report. For more information, visit www.mountsinai.org, or find Mount Sinai on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

About Zoetis

Zoetis (zô-EH-tis) is the leading animal health company, dedicated to supporting its customers and their businesses. Building on more than 60 years of experience in animal health, Zoetis discovers, develops, manufactures and markets veterinary vaccines and medicines, complemented by diagnostic products and genetic tests and supported by a range of services. In 2013, the company generated annual revenue of $4.6 billion. With approximately 9,800 employees worldwide at the beginning of 2014, Zoetis has a local presence in approximately 70 countries, including 27 manufacturing facilities in 10 countries. Its products serve veterinarians, livestock producers and people who raise and care for farm and companion animals in 120 countries. For more information, visit www.zoetis.com.

About Pfizer Foundation

The Pfizer Foundation is a charitable organization established by Pfizer Inc. Its mission is to promote access to quality health care, to nurture innovation, and to support the community involvement of Pfizer colleagues. The Pfizer Foundation provides funding and resources to local and international organizations that expand and improve global health strategies.
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