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Benefits of animal-assisted therapy in cancer patients undergoing treatment with chemotherapy, radiation therapy

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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

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.

More information: To access the study, copy and paste the following link into your browser: www.oncologypractice.com/filea … taledition_lores.pdf

Provided by The Mount Sinai Hospital

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