

Facility dogs in children's hospitals benefit both patients and staff, shows new study

May 31 2023



Photo of Yogi, a facility dog who worked at Shizuoka Children's Hospital during the study period. Visiting the bedside where a patient's child (left) and mother (right) spend time. Credit: Specified Nonprofit Organization Shine On Kids, CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Full-time hospital facility dogs can provide valuable support during terminal illness and help gain patients' cooperation, according to a new study that surveyed the medical staff at a large, public children's hospital

about their experiences working with these animals. The study, by Natsuko Murata-Kobayashi of Shine On! Kids, Japan, and colleagues, will be published in *PLOS ONE*.

Hospital facility dogs (HFDs) are professionally-trained dogs that differ from volunteer therapy dogs in their training and work capacity; they are typically cared for by [medical professionals](#) and go to work each day. In Japan, the first HFD team started working in 2010 at Shizuoka Children's Hospital in collaboration with the non-profit organization Shine On! Kids.

In 2019, researchers distributed a 20-question survey to all 626 full-time [medical staff](#) at Shizuoka Children's Hospital, inquiring about their experiences with HFDs. Of the staff, 431 responded, and 270 of them had directly observed HFD activities.

The most profound impacts of HFDs were observed in terminal care and patient cooperation, with 73% of respondents reporting that HFDs were "very often" or "always" beneficial in providing [palliative care](#) during the terminal phase. The same percentage reported that HFDs "very often" or "always" helped them gain the cooperation of a patient.

A majority of [respondents](#) also said that HFDs improved their workload and helped children who had difficulty with schedule changes. They further observed that children became more expressive and communicative following HFD interventions.

The authors conclude that a full-time model with HFDs and nurse handlers offers several benefits for supporting patients in children's hospitals. However, they note that more work is needed to study and optimize the effectiveness of specific HFD interventions.



Photo of Bailey, Yogi's predecessor and the first facility dog in Japan. Accompanying a patient for a bone marrow puncture with a nurse and child life specialist in the treatment room at Shizuoka Children's Hospital. Credit: Specified Nonprofit Organization Shine On Kids, CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The authors add, "[We] noted the significance of the finding that 'terminal palliative care' provided by facility dogs working in Japanese children's hospitals is highly valued by the medical staff. Through accumulating evidence from research, we aim to contribute to the broader adoption of facility dogs in children's hospitals both domestically and internationally."

More information: Natsuko Murata-Kobayashi et al, Exploring the benefits of full-time hospital facility dogs working with nurse handlers in a children's hospital, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0285768](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285768)

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Citation: Facility dogs in children's hospitals benefit both patients and staff, shows new study (2023, May 31) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-facility-dogs-children-hospitals-benefit.html>

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