FINAL REPORT

MORRIS ANIMAL FOUNDATION
CIRCLE OF DISCOVERY

Understanding the Transmission Risk of Bacterial Infections Between Therapy Dogs and Kids with Cancer

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RESULTS: Researchers find shampoo can help minimize transmission of harmful bacteria

The benefits of animal assistance therapy for children suffering from cancer are indisputable. But concerns remain about the health of assistance animals and their potential role in the transmission of disease-causing bacteria to these pediatric patients. Additionally, hospitals can be sources of serious infections that can affect dogs. Morris Animal Foundation-funded researchers at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine wanted to learn if two serious bacteria, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Clostridium difficile*, were present on the fur of therapy dogs, and then determine a method to decrease contamination by these bacteria.

The researchers checked the fur of therapy dogs before and after visits to establish a baseline prevalence rate for the presence of MRSA and *C. difficile*. Then, they used a chlorhexidine-based commercial shampoo on all dogs 24 hours prior to their scheduled hospital visits in conjunction with wiping the petting zone fur during the visits. The team found that these simple measures dramatically reduced the odds of infection. The researchers also collected additional biospecimens that will form the basis for a new PhD student project.

Keeping therapy dogs healthy is important for both the dog and the patients they visit. This research showed that shampooing with a medicated shampoo, coupled with wiping the petting zone down between patient interactions, decreased the potential for infection with serious hospital-associated infections. These findings will be important for animal assistance programs in hospitals worldwide.