

Helping pet owners make tough choices

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Maria Iliopoulou, Michigan State University, and colleagues are developing a tool to help pet owners assess their ailing pets' quality of life and make smart medical decisions on behalf of their four-legged friends. She is seen here with Rocky, one of her dogs. Credit: G.L. Kohuth/Michigan State University

Perhaps the hardest part of owning a pet is making difficult decisions when a beloved companion becomes seriously ill.

That's why Michigan State University researchers are developing a new tool to help people assess their ailing pets' quality of life, a key factor in decisions about when to order life-prolonging procedures and when an animal's suffering means it's time to let go.

In a new paper in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, MSU researchers describe a survey they created to help [pet owners](#) monitor the quality of life of dogs undergoing chemotherapy for cancer.

Veterinarians can use their training, experience and [scientific knowledge](#) to objectively assess an animal's quality of life in response to treatment, said lead author Maria Iliopoulou, an MSU-trained veterinarian and a doctoral student in the Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies. But outside the vet's office, pet owners rely on their own subjective impressions of the animal's well-being.

"Dogs obviously can't tell you how they're feeling, and sometimes pet owners may not know what changes in canine behavior they should pay attention to," Iliopoulou said. "By having this tool, we can help owners see what's really going on with the animal to improve decision making and facilitate the human-animal bond under the challenging circumstances of [cancer diagnosis](#) and treatment."

For the study, [dog owners](#) completed a questionnaire at the time of diagnosis about how the animal was behaving then and how they typically behaved six months prior. Follow-up questionnaires filled out three and six weeks later documented changes in behavior as the dogs underwent chemo. Meanwhile, the veterinarians filled out shorter surveys based on their observations.

"We wanted to see if the owner and the clinician would agree," Iliopoulou said. "The owner knows the pet, and the clinician knows the science. That's what the survey is all about, to identify components of a good quality of life and verbalize them in an understandable way to facilitate client and clinician communication regarding patient-care decisions."

As it turned out, responses to the questions by owners and veterinarians were fairly well-matched. That finding told the researchers the questionnaire was a helpful way to find common ground for treatment decisions.

The survey responses matched each other – and matched scientific data from the dogs' medical records—particularly closely on three questions involving changes in the dogs' play behavior, clinical signs of disease and canine happiness as perceived by the owner. Iliopoulou said the agreement on those questions makes them effective indicators of quality of life that can be used in animal cancer clinics, and in future studies.

With 29 participants, all at the MSU Animal Cancer Care Clinic, it's hard to draw broad conclusions from the relatively small pilot study. Still, Iliopoulou said the results were significant enough that she's planning a follow-up study with hundreds of dogs and owners. She also hopes the survey can eventually be adapted for animals with other illnesses.

Iliopoulou's co-authors were Barbara Kitchell and Vilma Yuzbasiyan-Gurkan, both professors in MSU's College of Veterinary Medicine.

Provided by Michigan State University

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