



How to enrol your dog in a cancer-drug trial

Why pets might make better research subjects than lab animals

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An idea with legs

DRUG development is a risky—and costly—business. Many promising compounds fail to cut the mustard when put through clinical trials. One reason is that drugs which work on laboratory animals may not work quite so well in human tests. Being able to pick winners and losers as early as possible would save money, and the One Health Company, based in Philadelphia, thinks it may have found a way. It is offering to help pharmaceutical firms test their wares on sick pets. Its first guinea pigs, as it were, will be dogs suffering from cancer.

There are several benefits, says the firm. By treating animals with existing cancers, it hopes to dodge a problem with modern animal research, which is that the “model” animals and diseases that are used to

test drugs are not always good stand-ins for the natural illness. For example, mice used to test cancer drugs may have had their tumours grafted surgically into their bodies, and their immune systems knocked out with drugs or by genetic engineering.

Another plus is that pet owners tend to be dedicated carers who are very knowledgeable about their four-legged companions and are likely to report even small changes in symptoms. Lab animals are checked far less frequently. Owners so far have been keen: the company claims that 64% of those told about the scheme sign up, a very high proportion.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of pet clinical trials, however, is the lack of government regulations covering medical records. One Health has been able to get access to 98% of records on animals from hospitals—a number that is unheard for human medical records. That allows the firm to identify patients and tissue samples, and recruit participants.

Over time, the firm hopes that pets will prove useful in diseases other than cancers. Horses, for instance, seem to be good proxies for humans when it comes to arthritis. Cats, meanwhile, may prove instructive in breast-cancer research. For now, those who enrol their pooches get a double benefit. Fido does his bit for science. And while doing so he gets access to what are, One Health hopes, cutting-edge cancer drugs.

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