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Partnership launches cat health initiative

The cat needs a helping hand, and a newly formed partnership between some of the most influential feline organizations in the country is looking to provide that support.

Cats are the most popular pet in the United States, outnumbering dogs by more than 9 million. But the cat falls woefully behind dogs when it comes to visits to the veterinarian. Research conducted into cat health also falls short of the research conducted for dogs. "The formulation of the Cat Health Network is a step in the right direction. The decline in feline veterinary visits is alarming and now more than ever before, it's becoming critical for us to identify new ways to improve the health and welfare of cats," said Dr. Letrisa Miller, AAFP Research Committee Chair.

That's why the Cat Health Network was formed. Comprised of the Morris Animal Foundation, the Winn Feline Foundation, the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, the Cat Health Network is committed to improving feline health and welfare through funding of targeted health studies, particularly in the areas of feline cancer, chronic renal disease, diabetes mellitus, feline lower urinary tract disease and pain management. According to Winn Feline President Dr. Vicki Thayer, "Winn's history of support of genetic research, e.g. polycystic kidney disease in Persians, makes this collaborative effort a natural fit."

"Cats are America's most popular pet, yet they receive far less veterinary care than their canine counterparts," said Dr. Garry Adams, AVMF Animal Health Studies Chair and former member of the AVMA Council on Research. "In addition to receiving less veterinary care, there is also less research conducted on cat health, and, as a result, new diagnostic and treatment options are lagging behind those for dogs. The Cat Health Network believes that feline-exclusive research will bring about much-needed improvements in the treatment of cats."

This precedent-setting collaboration is dedicated to making a significant difference in the health and welfare of domestic cats.

"Our ability to use genomics in improving cat health is a revolutionary step that we believe will reveal new insights about fighting cat disease and improving overall cat health," said Dr. Wayne Jensen, Chief Scientific Officer of the Morris Animal Foundation. "The cat is the most underfunded domestic animal in research, and this unified approach toward improving the lives of cats is one way we can take the lead and make a collective impact."

The Cat Health Network recently approved several research initiatives that will be conducted in laboratories both here in the U.S. and abroad. To assist them in their research, the investigators will receive samples of feline single nucleotide polymorphisms, or SNPs. SNPs are small variations from the common feline DNA sequence that can be used as markers to track down genes responsible for genetic diseases. Hill's Pet Nutrition donated the SNPs, valued at about \$1 million, to the Morris Animal Foundation in 2008 in an effort to jump-start the research initiatives.

The investigators, and their research projects, include:

- Dr. Stephen O'Brien, National Cancer Institute, "Dense Physical Linkage Map Using SNP Array for Rigorous Assembly of the Feline Genome Sequence."
- Dr. Tosso Leeb, University of Bern, Switzerland, "Genetic Analysis of Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy in Maine Coon Cats;" and "Genetic Analysis of Polycystic Kidney Disease in Maine Coon Cats."
- Dr. Leslie Lyons, University of California-Davis, "Genome-wide Association Studies of Brachycephaly in Domestic Cats;" "Construction of a High-Resolution Map for Assisting Cat Genome Sequence Assembly;" "Genome-wide Association Study for Hypokalemic Polymyopathy in Burmese Cats;" and "Genome-wide Association Studies for Progressive Retinal Atrophies in Cats."
- Dr. Robert Grahn, University of California-Davis, "Genome-wide Association Study for Congenital Muscular Dystrophy in Sphynx and Devon Rex Cats."
- Dr. Bianca Hasse, University of Sydney, Australia, "Bodyweight: Investigation of Genetic Aspects in an Experimental Cat Population."
- Dr. Kathryn Meurs, Washington State University, "Genome Wide Association of Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy in the Sphynx Cat."
- Dr. Niels C. Pedersen, University of California-Davis, "Genetic susceptibility to Feline Infectious Peritonitis."
- Dr. William Murphy, Texas A & M University "Mapping Feline Disease Phenotypes Using Interspecies Hybrids"

The Cat Health Network is the first initiative launched under the broader Animal Health Network, which was founded to bring together like-minded groups to facilitate greater research in a collaborative effort.

"This initial research into cat health and welfare is just the start," stated Michael Cathey, AVMF Executive Director. "It is our hope that from the Cat Health Network will spring future projects that will broaden our scope to the benefit of all animal species."

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Morris Animal Foundation helps animals enjoy longer, healthier lives by advancing health and welfare research that protects, treats and cures companion animals, horses and wildlife worldwide. Help create a healthier tomorrow for animals at www.MorrisAnimalFoundation.org.

The American Veterinary Medical Foundation (AVMF) is the charitable arm of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). For nearly 50 years, AVMF has been dedicated to embracing and advancing the well-being and medical care of animals. Charitable contributions and support to the Foundation help veterinarians help animals. Initiatives include: Humane Outreach-Animal Welfare, Education and Public Awareness, Research Support, Student Enhancement and Support of the AVMA and its Initiatives. In the last decade, AVMF has awarded grants totaling nearly \$10,000,000.

Founded in 1968 by the Cat Fanciers' Association, the **Winn Feline Foundation** is the only international charity solely devoted to funding feline health studies and where the focus is on having "Every Cat, Every Day" live longer, healthier lives.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners improves the health and welfare of cats by supporting high standards of practice, continuing education, and scientific investigation. For more information, please visit www.catvets.com.