



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

**BIOETHICAL PROBLEMS CONCERNING THE USE OF ANIMALS IN ACTIVITIES
LINKED TO HUMAN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

(21st October 2005)

abstract

The NBC deals with pet therapy, in other words, activities conducted for the benefit of human beings and implemented using animals. This practice raises issues regarding the pursuit of health and human well-being as well as the actual protection of animal well-being. Within the sphere of pet therapy a specific interaction between man and animal is established, which tends to achieve a very special form of “therapeutic alliance” – consistent with the idea of medical care or “caring”. This is examined using four types of relationships: a) cohabitation with an animal owned by a sick person in his or her own home or in a health care setting; b) the training and use of an animal to help a disabled person in his or her daily life; c) animal-assisted therapy; d) animal-assisted activities.

The bioethical problem concerns the assessment of the alleged benefits of pet therapy for humans and the guarantee that the animal enjoys a state of well-being or more, if possible, with it actually benefitting from this activity.

Bioethical relevance is also given to the judgement on the use of these practices (some of which still in the working hypothesis stage) in relation to the costs, the alternatives, the demonstration of their actual effectiveness, the decision-sharing with the patient through the practice of informed consent.

Therefore, the NBC recommends that - following careful evaluation of the protocols by the Ethical Committees - research aimed at identifying the real benefits for health and human well-being should be supported, also in consideration of the possible risks of allergies or infections, and that this research, which makes use of so-called “gentle” training techniques, nevertheless, should not affect the well-being of the animals, but, should represent an improvement in their quality of life.