

Colleagues,

I imagine many of you remain troubled about the recent criticism aimed St. Joseph's Hospital for its now-halted cardiac research program involving dogs.

As you know, the standard process in addressing any complaint about animal care in research across London includes a concern report review by Western's Animal Care Committee. We moved swiftly to conduct this review – which involved site visits, records review, and in-depth interviews with the experts directly involved in this program.

After a careful assessment of the evidence, we found all allegations to be unfounded. The report is attached for your reference.

In summary, our findings confirmed that:

- The dogs were well cared for, with appropriate bedding, toys, and nutrition.
- They were with other dogs 24/7 and animal care staff interacted with them several times a day.
- Enrichment and socialization programs have been in place for many years.
- Dogs interacted directly with a research lab member between four and six days each week, with a focus on play involving novel toys to enhance enrichment.
- Following surgery, the dogs were monitored actively at least four times a day to start and then twice a day as recovery progressed. A clinical veterinarian was directly involved.
- Duration of heart attacks modeled human heart attacks, and the procedure impacted a small percentage of heart tissue; it did not induce heart failure. The dogs recovered rapidly from the procedure, with frequent monitoring.
- Experienced clinical vets observed the procedures and confirmed the competence of the veterinary technicians regarding all aspects of surgery and anesthesia.
- The research program was fully in line with its approved AUPs and followed all regulatory requirements.

We also concluded that the hospital could have done more to communicate the nature of the research and to respond swiftly to the allegations set out in the *National Post* story to address the misinformation shared with the public. We have also recognized that we need to do more to inform the public about our work. Toward that end the university and its affiliates are reinvigorating their efforts to increase the transparency in our animal research programs.



This has been a difficult time, made more challenging by a response from the provincial government that was issued without the benefit of expert consultation. We are aiming to advance that discussion through the appropriate channels.

In the meantime, have been using the opportunity to create more public conversation (through the [Toronto Star](#) and [CBC's The Current](#), among others), and since then [Globe & Mail](#) health reporter and columnist André Picard has written a thoughtful piece on the subject.

Western is committed to continuing to advocate for the importance and impact of animal research, and to supporting the work each of you do in ensuring this research is conducted at the highest standard.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Arthur'.

Arthur Brown

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Operating with delegated authority from the Western's Office of the Vice-President, Research, the Animal Care Committee (ACC) provides impartial oversight of animal-based research and teaching at Western and affiliate hospitals. The ACC ensures that decisions prioritize animal welfare while supporting high-quality, ethical science consistent with standards set by the Canadian Council on Animal Care and Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

In response to concerns regarding the dog research carried out at St. Joseph's Health Care London published in a Post-Media article August 7, 2025, Western's ACC triggered its own investigation by generating a Concern Report. The procedure for investigating Concern Reports is outlined in Proc-004 and in Western University's policy POL-004. The allegations in the Concern Report were generated by the Office of the ACC based on the Post-Media article as claimants remained anonymous.

The respondents in the concern reporting process were members of the animal care team at St. Joseph's Health Care London and members of the Prato research group. The investigation was carried out by three of Western University's veterinarians, one research scientist, manager of the office of the ACC and the chair of the ACC. All of the concern report investigators were free of any affiliation with St. Joseph's Health Care London or with the Prato research group or its members.

[Animal Welfare Allegations via PostMedia/Animal Justice Posts](#)

All of the animal welfare allegations levied against the research team and facility workers were found to be unsubstantiated. The animal welfare allegations and the results of the investigation are summarized below:

- [Age of Animals](#) - Allegation that '*puppies*' are used.
 - While the term puppy is ill-defined it was noted that the dogs were all sexually mature.
- [Dog Husbandry Concerns](#) -
 - '*No beds in the cages*' – All the dogs have beds – two types are provided, which were out of view in the photos or not recognized by the public as beds. Beds must be made of a material that prevents the dogs from shredding and eating them which can lead to intestinal obstruction. It was noted by our institutional vets that the same concern is often found in dogs kept as pets. Additionally, materials placed within kennels must be readily sanitized, as these dogs defecate

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and urinate in their kennels; absorbent materials within the kennel environment would cause unsanitary conditions in their living space.

- *'Dogs scared and alone for 23 hours with no contact'; 'pacing, howling, tail-sucking'* - Unsubstantiated. Through extensive interviews and analysis of multiple records, this claim is determined to be entirely untrue.
 - Extensive veterinary medical records for these dogs reveal no instances where dogs were examined and/or treated for tail sucking or for a tail injury of this nature.
 - Through extensive interviews and analysis of multiple records, this claim is determined to be entirely unsubstantiated. Dogs are not alone – they are with their conspecifics 24/7. Socialization programs ensure that dogs become quickly acclimated to their human caregivers. FAS scoring (Fear, Anxiety, Stress) is used to ensure that socialization programs reduce FAS scores as dogs become acclimated to their new environment after arriving from the vendor. Most dogs make a very positive transition to the kennel environment with mild signs of fear, anxiety, or stress (FAS 0-1).
 - The review of extensive records over several years confirmed that both positive reinforcement training and comprehensive rotational environmental enrichment programs have been in place for many years.
 - Animal Care staff interact with the dogs multiple times each and every day. Early every morning dogs are transferred from their kennels into the outdoor dog run that facilitates regular dog-to-dog social interactions (beds and a variety of toys are also provided).
 - Between four and six days each week the dogs interact directly with a research lab member certified in FAS Scoring – interactions are focused on play involving novel toys and games that further enhance the dogs' enrichment.
 - On the first day post-surgery, experienced Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVT)/Registered Lab Animal Technicians (RLAT) from the research team visit with, monitor, and provide any needed care minimum four times. As the dogs recover, these visits may be reduced to twice daily thereafter. Should any concerns be identified during the recovery phase, a clinical veterinarian is directly involved.

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- Most dogs have made a very positive transition to the kennel environment with mild signs of fear, anxiety, or stress (FAS 0-1). Since the fall of 2024, lab staff certified in the shelter version of FAS scoring (Fear, Anxiety, Stress) introduced a formal acclimation / socialization program for the dogs. At the end of July, the clinical veterinarian introduced this FAS scoring program to all Veterinary Technicians (Lab and Facility-level). This formal socialization program has reduced FAS scores as dogs become socialized to their new environment after arriving from the vendor.
 - AACP Team RVTs (arms-length from the research and operations teams) carry out inspections a minimum of three times per year.
 - Clinical veterinarians undertake rounds in the dog facility at least bi-weekly, and more often should their expertise be needed.
 - The ACC performs annual inspections through site visits to the Animal Facility. All observations and recommendations are presented to the ACC's Executive and Full ACC. Follow-up is undertaken, as needed.
 - OMAFA inspections are unannounced and occur at their discretion.
 - CCAC visits occur at least every three years.
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- **Post Surgical Care** - *'Dogs lie motionless after a procedure, whimpering in high-pitched whistle tones.'* This behaviour is akin to post-anesthesia delirium in humans and animals. It is even observed in dogs that have had anesthesia with no invasive procedure. Once the animal regains consciousness, the vocalization subsides. Vocalization of this type may also be due to **opioid dysphoria**, a well-recognized consequence of using opioid analgesics in dogs (<https://www.dvm360.com/view/is-it-pain-or-dysphoria-how-to-tell-the-difference-and-what-to-do-about-it>). Multimodal pain relief is a necessity for these dogs and is provided before anticipated onset of painful procedures (preemptive analgesia, per veterinary standards) and dogs are monitored closely by experienced Registered Veterinary Technicians for any breakthrough pain using the validated Dog Grimace Scale. If breakthrough pain does occur, more pain medication is given. The dogs recover rapidly (within 24 hours) from the procedure and are monitored frequently by qualified veterinary technicians for seven days post-operatively (or longer if required in consultation with the veterinarian).

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- **Heart Attack Duration** - Heart attacks, during which dogs are fully anesthetized and free of pain, are up to three hours in length, which aligns with the approved Animal Use Protocol. As the research team is trying to model human heart attacks that can last up to three hours or more prior to reperfusion, the length of heart attack is clinically relevant. The infarct size is only a small percentage of the functional heart tissue (~20% on average of left ventricular volume with some variation between individuals depending on the absence or presence of hemorrhage and extent of collateral blood flow). Sequelae of the infarct does not include induction of heart failure, hence the dogs do not require medications for heart failure to support heart function post-infarction.
- **RVT Inexperience Resulting in High Surgical Mortalities** – Mortality rates disclosed within the approved AUP are aligned with reality. Allegations of VT surgical incompetence are unfounded. Experienced clinical veterinarians have observed these surgeries, have been directly engaged in all unexpected morbidities and mortalities, and have confirmed the competence of these VTs regarding all aspects of surgery and anesthesia. Clinical veterinarians have confirmed that anesthesia-related deaths take place during surgeries performed by veterinarians and medical doctors; this is not a reflection of incompetence, but rather reflects the inherent risks associated with any procedure involving anesthesia. Results of a recent world-wide study show anaesthetic-related mortality in dogs was 0.69% <https://doi.org/10.1002/vetr.3604>

Animal Science Allegations via PostMedia/Animal Justice Posts

The animal Science-related allegations and the results of the investigation are summarized below:

- **AUP Alignment** – There were no identified breaches in approved AUP elements.
- **Clinical Relevancy** – The allegation that the dog model for imaging after MI is clinically irrelevant was not substantiated. The dog has coronary collateral circulation that approximates the human more closely than any other model species. The clinical relevancy of the work is evidenced by the greater than ten million scans world-wide that are performed each year based on this research carried out by the Prato laboratory. Delayed contrast MRI is now a standard of treatment for myocardial infarction.

C-119-Concern Report
Frank Prato's Cardiac Research Involving Dogs / Dog Care at
St. Joseph's Health Care London Animal Facility
Overview of Findings

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- This research is an example of successful translation (email 8 AUG 2025):

"In 1992 we published a seminal article establishing the biophysical basis of an MRI method to measure the amount of heart tissue damage caused by a heart attack. The initial work involved euthanizing 35 dogs. Follow up experiments, ending in 2006, resulted in euthanizing 100 additional dogs. It is hard to get an exact number, but the number of patients with cardiac disease which benefit from this MRI method, which could not have been developed without the dog research, is 10 to 30 million per year. This number of patients per year keeps growing, and we can estimate that 100 million cardiac patients have already benefited from this technology developed in dog. Hence for each dog euthanized about one million human patients have benefited." We have since been exploring this technology for other uses such as cardiac arrhythmias and hopefully soon to guide treatment for ventricular tachycardia and atrial fibrillation in patients and pets. We have been working on establishing new methods to quantify inflammation and fibrosis after a heart attack to improve disease staging and guide future treatment. The inflammation method has since been translated to human use, while we are still working on fibrosis. With our collaborators we have been working on methods to quantify iron in the heart and are now using these methods to find appropriate drugs to use after a heart attack in case there is hemorrhage. That's only a small fraction of our work and not all it has reached patients, but it just might have the potential to transform care, just as Frank's previous work already has.

- **Shared Use of Scanners for Humans and Animals:** The scanner was purchased by research funds allocated for animal imaging. Subsequently, the research group made it available to clinicians to help reduce human patient wait times. Safety protocols for cleaning the scanners in between use were approved by institutional safety officers.
- **Necessity of Euthanizing the Animals at End of Study:** The animals are humanely euthanized with approved procedures that minimize distress to validate the scientific results of the study using histopathology.