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Thailand releases ground breaking study on elephant therapy to commemorate UN's inauguration of World Autism Awareness Day.

April 2 was declared as World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) in perpetuity, according to the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 62/139, tabled by the State of Qatar on December 18, 2007.

To join in the global effort to increase awareness of autism with the inauguration of the World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD), the Thai Elephant-Assisted Therapy Project (TETP) has released the successful findings from their pilot study. The study was conducted by the research team at the Department of Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Associated medical Sciences of Chiang Mai University, in the north of Thailand.

The pilot study involved four participants who were paired with four well-trained elephants at the Thai Elephant Conservation Center. Each participant that volunteered for the study was an autistic client from the clinic of occupational therapy and ranged in age from 11-19 years. All were male. The participants were evaluated on function and competence using standardized tests and systematic observation, both before and after implementing the TETP. The elephant - assisted therapy program ran for a duration of three weeks, four days per week. During this time, the activities of the participants ranged from learning about the elephants and their habitat to actually riding and caring for the elephant (feeding, bathing, etc.)

The results from the post-evaluation data are extremely promising since every participant showed improvement in the function of sensory processing, social skills, postural control and balance, performance of daily living activities, and adaptive behavior. Parents also reported that

these functional skills carried over to other contexts, such as home and school.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is an intervention widely practiced by health professionals to assist autistic patients, but this ground breaking study was the world's first attempt to use Thai elephants in this type of therapy. Although further research is needed, the pilot study showed that elephant-assisted therapy is both feasible and appropriate for individuals with autism and that immediate, measurable improvements can be expected.

In order to further validate this study, the TETP members plan to conduct more extensive research investigating physiological factors, biochemical factors, and brain function. Compiling the results of more cases will further the scientific research and assist health professionals in achieving early detection and intervention of autism. For this reason, the TETP desires to set up a research center dedicated to this effort. The center would serve the following purposes: provide the facilities needed to further research in using elephants as an intervention with autistic individuals, expand the availability of the therapeutic course for those with autism, and provide a site for hosting the 2011 Asia Pacific Occupational Therapy Congress (APOTC) which Thailand has the distinction of being chosen for from among many applicants. To do this well and to positively impact the lives of those with autism and their families, more funding is needed. If you would like to participate or receive further updates, please visit us at www.elephanttherapy.org or <http://www.tetp.org>