



# Animal Reiki and My Journey Into Research

BY CLAUDIA R. BARBIERI, DVM

**S**TARTING IN childhood, I carried two dreams side by side: to become a scientist and a veterinarian. I made it to veterinary school but left a year and a half after starting because the cruelty involved in animal testing was something I could not reconcile with my principles. So, I left, earned a bachelor's degree in economics, and spent 17 years working in the oil industry and financial markets as an economist, building a life that looked successful from

the outside, even though something essential for me remained unfulfilled.

Eventually, I returned to university to reclaim my original dream. I graduated in Veterinary Medicine, trained as a homeopath, and began working with my genuine passion, which is our beloved animals. But quietly, somewhere along the way, I had stopped believing in myself as a scientist. My veterinary education included research, but

mainstream veterinary research didn't particularly appeal to me. I always prioritized the central principle I learned in my homeopathic studies, the ancient Hippocratic precept: "First, do no harm."

The childhood dream had not disappeared, but it had gone underground, buried under layers of doubt. Who was I to conduct research? Who was I to think I could contribute something meaningful to science? The version of me who had previously looked at the world with that unstoppable curiosity felt very far away, and I told myself that being a vet was already more than enough, as it was beyond my expectations.

I did not realize how much I had lost until Reiki awakened that dormant part of me. This is the hardest part of the story to put into words, and yet it may be the most important. I started learning Reiki after losing one of my beloved dogs to cancer, and what began as a lifeline in grief gradually became a meaningful purpose.

Then came the discovery that genuinely changed the trajectory of my professional life. I discovered Reiki research. Peer-reviewed, scientifically structured research exploring the therapeutic potential of this Japanese healing practice in clinical and hospital settings. Here was a healing modality with documented benefits, a growing body of evidence, and crucially, no animal testing or other adverse effects.

After all, Reiki did not simply introduce me to a healing practice; it healed things deep inside me. Each course I took, each session I received or gave myself as self-practice, cleared away the accumulated weight of years spent living out of alignment with my true self. It unblocked something essential, as if my most authentic self, that curious child who wanted to be a scientist, the person who had genuinely believed that she could make a difference, has simply been waiting for permission to return. Reiki showed me that the path I had always wanted was open to me, and it made me believe again that I had something real to contribute.

Reiki is a Japanese life-energy healing technique developed in the early twentieth century by Mikao Usui, in which practitioners channel spiritually guided life energy through their hands, either through gentle touch or at a distance. Reiki energy has its own consciousness and intelligence and guides itself based on the individual's needs, healing or releasing unhealthy feelings and energies and promoting balance, harmony, and well-being by empowering the body's natural healing capacity.

Skeptics have long questioned whether such a practice could withstand scientific scrutiny, but the research, while still growing, tells a genuinely interesting story. Studies conducted in healthcare settings have found that Reiki sessions can significantly reduce pain, anxiety, and fatigue in patients undergoing cancer treatment, surgery, chronic diseases, and other health issues. Research published in peer-reviewed journals shows beneficial reductions in heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels following Reiki sessions.

The healthcare programs of major hospitals around the world have integrated Reiki, not as a replacement for conventional treatment, but as an integrative therapy that works with medicine to improve patient well-being. These include highly respected institutions such as the Mayo Clinic, Yale-New Haven Hospital, and Boston Children's Hospital, the last of which

I visited in person and witnessed the beauty of the Reiki program they offer to children and their families and the difference it makes in their lives.

Although we do not yet fully understand the mechanisms of action, the healthy, positive healing benefits of Reiki are scientifically verified. And scientists are conducting studies to determine how Reiki's mechanisms create these benefits. Some hypothesize that Reiki operates through biofield interactions, while others think it may be via neurobiological pathways, or a combination of both. But in the world of integrative medicine, the emphasis is on what works. Reiki's record of accomplishment for pain, anxiety, and stress reduction, among other benefits, is impressive.

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When I discovered all of this, my mind immediately turned to animals. Reiki was being used for humans in hospitals, but what about our animal companions, who suffer from chronic disease, pain, and anxiety just as we do, and who deserve the same compassion-driven care? I began asking questions and found a significant gap. While integrative therapies were gaining ground in human medicine, veterinary applications of Reiki remained unexplored in the scientific literature, and one of the primary obstacles was precisely the absence of controlled research. That realization made me want to do something about it, though I did not know where to begin.

With mentoring from my ICRT Licensed Reiki Master Teacher, I began designing my first clinical trial. The process was humbling and exhilarating in equal measure. I did my best to refine the design to ensure it was as precise as possible and to meet the requirements.

We enrolled 54 adult dogs aged eight or older with common health complaints and randomly assigned them to receive either distance Reiki or sham Reiki sessions. This blinded study included six weekly sessions and tracked eleven variables across the study period. Owners assessed changes in their animals' health and well-being at three and six weeks.

The results showed that dogs in the Reiki group experienced significant pain reduction compared with the control group, as assessed by their owners. No significant differences were observed in the other variables, which is itself an important finding, as it directs future research toward the most promising effects. These were preliminary results, and I present them as such, since science advances through careful accumulation of evidence, replication, and refinement. But as a first step, they are genuinely encouraging.

This study began after I attended the 2024 Second Annual International Reiki Research Conference, hosted by the Center for Reiki Research (CRR). Following the conference, I joined the CRR as a professional member, and in 2025, I had the honor of presenting my research abstract at the Third Annual International Reiki Research Conference. That same year, I began serving as a volunteer research assistant on a national survey for the prevalence of integrative therapies in U.S. hospitals, a project of significant relevance to the Reiki community and patients seeking holistic care.

Recently, I joined the organization's Board of Directors as a Member at Large, surrounding myself with a community

of researchers who treat this work with the same seriousness I do and deepened my commitment to this path.

The peer-reviewed *Journal of the American Holistic Veterinary Association* published my study entitled "Impact of Distant Reiki on Owner Assessment of Health and Wellbeing of Adult Dogs: A Blinded, Placebo-Controlled, Randomized Trial" in the Summer 2025 edition.

Following the publication of my first study, I started a second one, this time exploring the impact of Reiki on anxiety in both dogs and their owners. Since the human-animal bond is profound and well-documented, and stress in one partner often mirrors stress in the other, this is an important subject for both human and veterinary medicine. If Reiki can address anxiety simultaneously in both species, the implications for veterinary practice and for the quality of life of animals and their people are significant. The results are still being analyzed, and even at this early stage, I am moved by what I am seeing.

Years ago, during my first Reiki course, my teacher told us that Reiki is not just a practice but a path and a lifestyle. At the time, I did not fully understand what she meant, but now I do. When I sat with my grief after losing my dog, I could not have imagined that it would lead me to discover the published research, and then to an international research community, a second scientific study underway, and to a sense of purpose so complete that it feels less like a career and more like a calling.

As Reiki teaches us, we must be grateful every day for our life and for all the opportunities we have, and none of this work happens in isolation. It depends on the generosity of Reiki Masters who volunteer their time to conduct sessions, and on the trust of the dog owners and their animals who take part in these trials. I am deeply grateful to all of them for their contribution to this work and to the whole Reiki community.

What I am working toward is a model of veterinary medicine that honors the whole animal, not just the physical body, but the energetic, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of health that our instruments have not yet learned to measure. A medicine built on the Hippocratic principle I have carried since my earliest days: First, do no harm. The animals in our care cannot speak for themselves in human language, but they communicate constantly through their bodies, their behavior, and their well-being, and they deserve practitioners who will listen with more than just their clinical training.

Beyond its personal impact, Reiki transformed my analytical approach, emphasizing the importance of high-quality research. I believe that science, at its best, is the integrity of observing and interpreting the world's messages with precision. My research continues to unfold, and I am honored to contribute to advancing this field. ■



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