

The European canine lymphoma network: a joining initiative to generate consensus guidelines for the diagnosis and therapy in canine lymphoma and research partnership

The diagnostic and therapeutic approaches to canine lymphoma are currently poorly standardized, and vary between different institutions. By comparison, in human medicine, guidelines to standardize the medical approach to patient care are published regularly and also international conferences are organized to review these guidelines.^{1–3}

For canine lymphoma, one consensus document evaluating response to treatment has been published⁴ recently but few others guidelines are available,⁵ meaning that many approaches are based upon the opinions of individual experts. However, regular updates reflecting emerging techniques or discoveries are rarely carried out.

The European Canine Lymphoma Network (ECLN) was established in 2009 as a joint initiative of the Universities of Vienna and Milan. The aim were defining common research targets, harmonizing laboratory protocols as a pre-requisite to the validation of specific diagnostic tools, and establishing effective collaborations and integrated prospective research projects amongst interested individuals. A website (www.eu-can-lymph.net) was created and more than 70 researchers from 25 European different institutions were surveyed. In June 2013, the 1st Meeting of the ECLN was organized in Switzerland during the 12th International Conference on Malignant Lymphoma. More than 160 participants, including human and veterinary clinicians from 15 different countries, attended.⁶ The workshop established high-priority at the need to create canine lymphoma consensus guidelines encompassing the most up-to-date diagnostic and therapeutic approaches, also drawing comparisons with the human counterpart, as a first step. In collaboration with Solaris CRO, a contract research organization, a new webpage, logo and a dedicated platform (Consensus Platform) specifically designed to facilitate the creation of such documents were created.

In September 2013, the process of recruiting researchers and clinicians to the ECLN began, and, currently collecting more than 120 researchers in one year, is still ongoing. The first documents regarding the ECLN's constitution and intellectual property rights were produced.

The Consensus Platform is comprised of two working groups (WGs; Fig. 1), a diagnostic group (WG1) and a therapeutic group (WG2) that are coordinated by an appointed Chairperson (WG Chair). The WG1 was further composed by six panels comprising: cytology, histopathology, flow cytometry, molecular biology/genetics, biomarkers and imaging, whereas WG2 was divided in B-cell lymphoma, T-cell lymphoma, extranodal lymphoma, clinical trials and pharmacotoxicology, and immunotherapy panels. Each panel was further composed by a number of Chairs and Editors. By regulation the panel Chair coordinates the work of the Editors and maintains contact with the WG Chair and the platform administrator.

Within each panel, the members, either Participants or Auditors, were selected through review of individual curriculum vitae. A participant had to demonstrate sufficient experience relevant to the panel topic allowing him/her to take part in future forum discussions and to vote on the content of consensus documents. Auditors, although lacking specific experience in a particular field, are permitted to attend all steps of the creation of a consensus document but cannot vote specifically on the content of written materials. Members with a potential conflict of interest or belonging to the same institution as another Participant are relegated to the role of Auditors, thereby avoiding any possible bias in the voting process. Finally, 2–3 external reviewers were appointed to each panel to act as specialist editors. These individuals were chosen because they were non-European but internationally recognized veterinary experts

WG 1: DIAGNOSTIC						WG 2: THERAPY		WG chair			
CYTOLOGY	HISTOPATHOLOGY	FLOW CYTOMETRY	MOLECULAR BIOLOGY & GENETIC	BIOMARKERS	IMAGING	B CELL LYMPHOMA	T CELL LYMPHOMA	EXTRANODAL LYMPHOMA	CLINICAL TRIALS	IMMUNOTHERAPY	Panel chair
											3-4 panel editors
											Panel participants
											Panel auditors
											2-3 external reviewers
											PANELS

Figure 1. Composition of the panels and the working groups of the network and of the different roles identified for the members.

or European non-veterinary specialists working in other fields.

The creation of a document employs the 'Delphi method' considered to be the optimal way to reach a consensus amongst experts. It relies on a series of questionnaires that are provided to the panel Participants in 'rounds' until answers converge towards a common answer.⁷ This method offers the following advantages:

1. The process is very rapid and inclusive.
2. Anonymity prevents the authority, personality, or reputation of some participants from dominating others.
3. Participants are not required to undertake long, expensive journeys to join working meetings.
4. It respects differences in language, economical capabilities and origins amongst members.
5. Group decisions are more representative than those of individuals.

The Delphi method also perfectly suits the use of online platforms and distance communication methods.

The consensus platform created by Solaris has several functions including the collection and circulation of documents and papers amongst members that may be useful for the authoring of draft documents, holding of forum discussions,

teleconferences and online presentations, creation of common guidelines and the final approval and delivery of definitive consensus statements. All members have access to the platform, but specific privileges are assigned according to an individual's different role.

After review of the relevant reference sources by the panel Editors, Participants are approached through successive rounds of questioning (Fig. 2). The answers and the feedback are collected in an anonymous fashion. Only written statements reaching at least 75% consensus agreement amongst the Participants may be included in the draft document, otherwise statements are re-written and additional rounds of questions follow until the threshold agreement level of 75% is reached. The time that elapses for the document to achieve potential publication status is much shorter than when using a more classical approach.

In conclusion, the aims of the ECLN are various. First, based on the literature review and personal experiences, the identification of 'hot topics' that require further investigation in canine lymphoma will be encountered by the panels. Second, the ECLN will stimulate and support the creation of collaborations between people that share similar research affinity and last, this will potentially open the possibility to consider project applications at the European level, also in the context of Horizon 2020. As the network is an open structure, any individual

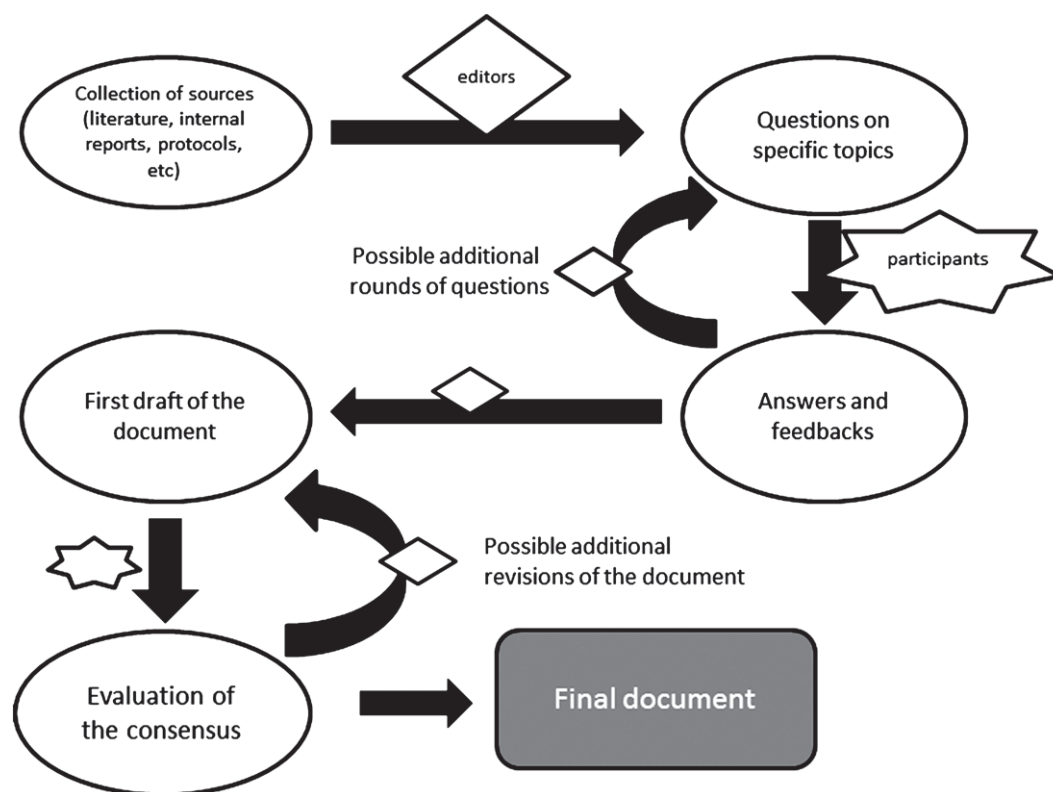


Figure 2. Algorithm summarizing the process of creation of a consensus document using a Delphi approach and the consensus platform.

who wants to be considered as a possible member is welcome to join; additionally, possible sponsors willing to support research projects on canine lymphoma are being actively sought.

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