

## DOGS THAT LEARN TO SIT, STAY AND 'HEAL'

By Kim Smith, director, Volunteer Services, Overlake Hospital Medical Center

If you are a patient at Overlake Hospital Medical Center, you expect nurses, doctors, volunteers, family and friends to stop by your room, but what about a four-legged visitor with fur? It's not as strange as it may seem. Dogs and other animals are gaining widespread acceptance in nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and hospitals around the country because of the therapeutic value that animals bring to patients who welcome their visits. It is one piece of a bigger movement in health care to incorporate the healing arts of sound, sight and touch to improve patients' experiences.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the physiological benefits of what is called pet therapy. The American Heart Association sponsored a study that showed visits

from therapeutic dogs lowered the anxiety, stress, and heart and lung pressure among hear-failure patients. Another report showed the beneficial effect on immune system functions when petting a dog.

Pet owners appear to live longer and report being less lonely than non-pet owners, and heart patients with pets have lower mortality rates, according to studies compiled by the Delta Society, a Seattle-based non-profit that has for almost 20 years been introducing professionally trained animals to people with mental and physical disabilities. A study done at State University of New York in Buffalo, involved two groups of stockbrokers already taking medication for high blood pressure. One group had pets, the other did not. Researchers placed both groups in simulated stressful situations, and

those who had pets displayed significantly smaller systolic blood pressure than those who did not.

When animals visit patients during a stay at Overlake, there are many intangible benefits for both patients and employees. Animals bring a sense of home and comfort for anyone stressed by illness, separation from family, fear and loneliness. When a dog walks through the door, it brings a welcome change from routine. Affection is doled out by an animal without regard to age, illness or disability. At the end of life, when palliative care is in place, an animal can be a source of significant comfort and distraction.

Trained pets and handlers can also participate in animal-assisted activity and therapy programs, particularly in rehabilitation centers. Animals can be very helpful when working with an occupational therapist and a patient who has difficulty controlling fine motor skills. For example, the therapist can have the patient manipulate buckles, leashes and collars, or open a container of treats and feed small pieces of food to a dog or cat.

All kinds of animals can be used in pet therapy. While the Delta Society mainly certifies dogs, some hospitals have visits from cats. Even a potbellied pig and a pygmy goat have passed the society's training programs. Rabbits can also be good therapy animals because they are quiet, small and soft.

Delta Society dogs are obedience-trained and most have passed the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizenship test, which indicates they are well mannered. The owner is also given special training, and then a Delta Society evaluator observes the dog and owner before giving a stamp of approval. Most health-care organizations have rigorous cleanliness requirements for the animal, such as being bathed within 24 hours of a visit, with teeth brushed, ears cleaned and nails clipped. Patients who desire a visit from a pet are typically visited for about five to 10 minutes.

To learn more about pet therapy programs, visit [www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org) or call the local chapter at 679-5500.

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