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Pet Therapy Programs Benefit Patients Physically and Emotionally

By Jennifer Larson, contributor

May 27, 2011 - When Cynthia Ingram, RN, walks into the room, people pay attention. But that attention might be more focused on Tori, the four-year-old Labradoodle with soft white fur who's walking next to her.

"We cannot walk down the hall without people gathering around us," said Ingram, an occupational health nurse and the animal therapy coordinator at Midwestern Regional Medical Center in Zion, Ill. "They love her."

Tori and Ingram have worked as the animal therapy team at Midwestern for more than two years. They visit patients and their families to give them some canine comfort and care while they're in the hospital for cancer treatment.

"It creates a distraction from the physical stress that comes from having cancer, the pain," said Katherine Puckett, Ph.D., national director of mind-body medicine for Cancer Treatment Centers of America. "It takes people's minds off that to be interacting with Tori."

Animal therapy is growing in popularity, as health care organizations find that patients respond enthusiastically to the chance to hug a dog or pet a cat while they're recovering from surgery or an illness. Trained animals and their human partners now work in a variety of settings, from pediatric wards to cancer units to hospices. Some organizations use volunteer teams from the community, while others have a resident animal or two, like Tori.

The San Diego Hospice and the Institute for Palliative Medicine has offered pet therapy services for at least 10 years. Today, the program has 27 volunteer teams of people and animals, including one cat that joined the roster of therapy dogs. All of them are trained and certified.

"It's just been a wonderful, wonderful experience," said Kim Heinrichs, executive director of volunteer resources for the hospice.

There's a special way that animals connect with people that is different from the way people connect with other people, Heinrichs said. The animals always just seem to know what the person needs and takes cues from them. Some patients just sit quietly while petting the dog next to them, while others began to talk and relive old memories.

"Pets just accept the patient unconditionally," she said.

Puckett agreed. Sometimes the presence of an animal really gets people to relax and let down their guard.

"People try to be brave and tough, and they think they should just tough it up," she said. "It just comes out, and because Tori offers unconditional love, they just start talking."

Beyond the emotional satisfaction, pet therapy also has physiological benefits for patients.

“There’s reduction in anxiety, reduction in blood pressure, reductions in feelings of isolation and depression, and increased feelings of relaxation,” Heinrichs said. “Those are the things that have been known to happen.”

Lynda Porter-Wenzlaff, Ph.D., RN, noted that there’s much more research on the benefits available today than even just a few years ago. Evidence shows that petting a dog can lower people’s heart rate, as well as their blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

She once worked for a children’s hospital where two trained Australian shepherd therapy dogs came to snuggle with babies who had spent time in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Babies in isolettes in the NICU didn’t get many chances for sensory stimulation, but a few moments on a blanket lying against the warm belly of a gently breathing dog, wiggling their small fingers in the dog’s fur, changed that.

Also, animals can be excellent assistants for occupational and physical therapists, said Porter-Wenzlaff, a professor who teaches a course on animal therapy for nursing and health professional students at the UT Health Science Center in San Antonio, Texas.

She described a recent session in her class, in which the students learned how a dog can help a recovering stroke patient. Porter-Wenzlaff pretended to be a patient who was asked to go through a list of activities: choosing a toy to throw, tossing the toy for the dog to retrieve, putting the toy away, and giving the dog a treat as a reward. Going through those physical activities can help a patient achieve the goals set out by the therapist for recovery.

“They can see that this is actually a therapeutic modality...and they can measure the achievement of it,” she said.

Animals really can change people’s lives for the better, agreed Suzy Kitchens, RN, a former operating room nurse and case manager.

Kitchens is the chairman of the board of a new organization called Smokey Mountain Service Dogs, which was launched last October in East Tennessee. The organization’s mission is to train service animals for disabled veterans. And as someone who has spent many years as a caregiver, Kitchens believes there’s a spiritual aspect to the relationships that form between animals and people that give people a brighter outlook on life.

“When you see how much these service dogs mean to the people who get them...it gives you such pride when you pass the leash to the recipient, and you watch them bond,” said Kitchens. “There is just nothing like that.”

PHOTO CAPTION: Cynthia Ingram, RN, and her animal therapy partner, Tori, the Labradoodle, bring joy and comfort to the patient they visit. Photo courtesy of Midwestern Regional Medical Center.

PHOTO CAPTION: Tori spends some time with Betty, a patient going through chemotherapy who was missing her dog at home. After their visit, Betty had her best blood pressure reading ever, which she attributed to her visit with Tori. Photo courtesy of Midwestern Regional Medical Center.

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