



PET POWER

How Animal Therapy Can be Good Medicine

By Michelle F. Solomon

Jonathon Matouk hadn't smiled in days. The 14-year-old had recently undergone painful surgery in which two steel rods had to be implanted into his arm. Doctors were unable to perform the surgery in his hometown in Trinidad, so he and his parents had come to Coral Springs Medical Center (CSMC) to have the procedure done.

Lucie Di Capua poked her head into the open door of Jonathon's room. "Would you like to see Phoebe?" she asked. Jonathon nodded. Phoebe, a black Labrador retriever, slowly made her way into the room, looking to her owner, Lucie, for guidance. In Phoebe's mouth was a bright yellow tennis ball. "Would you like to throw the ball for Phoebe?" Lucie asked. Jonathon nodded again. On cue, Phoebe dropped the ball gently into Jonathon's lap. He took the ball and gave it a hard toss out into the hallway. Phoebe went after it, caught the ball in her mouth, then slowly and steadily brought it back, gently placing it back in Jonathon's lap. A big grin crossed the teenager's face. "That's the first time he's smiled in a couple of days," said his mother, Suzanne.

While playing fetch with a dog may not be the first thing you associate with recovery at a hospital, it was part of the routine at CSMC that day. Every other week,

the medical center's Pet Assisted Activity program, coordinated by Janice L. Zack, Certified Child Life Specialist, allows certified Animal Assisted Therapy teams to stop by patients' rooms in the hospital's pediatric ward. "It has been proven that the use of the dogs has shown to help reduce stress for pediatric patients and their families," says Zack. Without question, today definitely offered evidence to support this.

ANIMAL ASSISTED ACTIVITY

In 2001, the program at CSMC began with one pet team, a man named Greg and his golden retriever, Champ. These days, seven pet teams, including Greg and Champ, visit the hospital on a regular basis. Most of what is practiced today in many hospital and nursing home settings using animals to help patients therapeutically is called Animal

Assisted Activity, and not pet therapy, though the latter term is commonly used. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), Animal Assisted Activity provides opportunities for motivation, education or recreation to enhance quality of life. Animal Assisted Therapy is different in that the process is documented and evaluated. It is also a goal-



directed therapeutic intervention that is used in the treatment process.

While the visits to the pediatric ward are usually not documented or evaluated and therefore classified as Animal Assisted Activity, Phoebe's amazing tennis ball trick and the other frequent visits from therapy dogs in the pediatric ward definitely have an impact on patient wellness. "We see this time and time again with the patients. Pets reduce stress, lift spirits and promote healing in a comforting way," says Zack.

A TIME-TESTED THERAPY

Using animals to help patients is not a new concept. The first documented use of animal therapy dates back to 1792, when an asylum used animals as part of the rehabilitation of its patients. The animals emphasized a "living environment" and the patients were encouraged to learn to care for them, according to researchers

Lucinda Trivedi and James Perl, who in 1995 published a review focused on using animal assisted counseling in elementary schools.

In 2001, when dogs were brought to a family assistance center set up on Pier 94 to comfort those affected by the World Trade Center disaster, journalist Julie V. Iovine cited the connection between animals and people from the days of "hunter-gatherers" in a story for *The New York Times*. Iovine pointed out in her article that the Mayans believed each person was assigned a "soul animal" as a guide through life. And according to Iovine's research, in the 19th century Florence Nightingale recommended small pets for the chronically ill.

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Society of Broward County. "Volunteers come to us because they have a loving pet that they want to share with people who are less fortunate than they are," says Marni Bellavia, the manager of the Animal Assisted Therapy program at the Humane Society of Broward County. "Right now we have approximately 80 human volunteers and more than 125 dogs and two cats," says Bellavia.

Owners go through a rigorous certification program with their animals and are evaluated before becoming certified. Pets wear a small vest from the Humane Society of Broward County when they visit a location such as a hospital so that they can be easily identified as Animal Assisted Therapy volunteers.

In addition to local hospitals, teams visit psychiatric facilities, short and long-term care nursing homes and assisted living facilities, rehabilitation facilities, adult day care centers, eating disorder clinics, hospice facilities and local schools.

For students in Broward County Public Schools, visits from the Animal Assisted Therapy dogs have also opened new doors. Merrie Meyers Kershaw, director of parents, business and community partnerships, for the Broward County School Board, says the dogs are used in some curriculums in the schools. An Animal Assisted Therapy team from the Humane Society of Broward County works with autistic students on a regular basis. "I think what Animal Assisted Therapy has done is to help us look really beyond what traditional therapy offers and find an innovative way to help stimulate and motivate children. The animals are non-judgmental and the students enjoy the attention they get from them," observes Meyers Kershaw.

AN INSTINCT TO HELP

The irrefutable therapeutic benefit of using pets to help the sick, elderly and mentally challenged has become the subject of numerous studies, but volunteers like Joan Fink say that it's easy to experience firsthand the positive effects of the pets. An event during a scheduled visit to CSMC with her Malti-Poo, Cookie, left a lasting impression on the volunteer. One of the patients that Joan and Cookie saw that day was a boy in a wheelchair in the pediatric ward. She learned that doctors and nurses had been working with the boy to help him get up from the chair and try to take a few steps, but he remained afraid. She thought that maybe a visit from Cookie would lift his spirits.

On the day of the visit, Cookie ran up to the boy and put her two

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front paws on his legs. "She turned around and ran down the hall, then came back," says Joan, who has been bringing Cookie to the hospital for five years. The little dog did the exercise four or five times. "I think the dog is calling me to follow her," the boy said. It was then that a nurse and a doctor came out into the hallway and helped the boy lift himself out of the chair.

"Cookie led him around the hallway twice. She stayed about five feet in front of him and kept looking back to make sure he was following," says Joan.

It was then that Joan realized that Cookie knew that this was her job, that this was her purpose. "She had an instinct for that child and she knew what his needs were. I've seen this so many times since. The animals know they are here to help. For me it has opened up a whole new chapter in my life. It's a very rewarding experience," she says.