

Pets in healthcare prove to be key motivators in recovery



Animals and pets play an increasingly important therapy role in a range of healthcare settings including children's hospitals and nursing homes. Evidence indicates that animal assisted therapy can be an effective complement to other forms of medical treatment and care and also provides a source of interest and social interaction for patients and a rewarding experience for volunteers.

Sophie, a Newfoundland dog has worked for five years as a volunteer with Delta in the Dog Visiting Program. The Delta Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) commenced in 2007 with Sophie being the first dog to be used in the program. AAT is an innovative plan bringing together sick children and therapy dogs that is proving to be a vital step in the road to recovery for young patients.

Four year old Hayley Sparkl, who has Osteogenesis Imperfecta, or brittle bone disease, is just one of the success stories. Sophie and Hayley worked together for two years before Sue Armston, Sophie's trainer and owner retired the Newfoundland for some rest and relaxation.

"I really enjoy working with the kids. I love working on something where I can see that what I'm doing is really helping make a difference." Sue Armston, Delta Animal Assisted Therapy

For many children, ongoing physiotherapy and rehabilitation can be very challenging. The AAT program, the first of its kind to be implemented in New South Wales, provides a motivating factor that young patients need to continue to progress.

Hayley's mother Sharon said she always hoped her daughter would walk, but was unsure whether it would ever happen. "She's been coming to physiotherapy for most of her life, but as a three year old, she began to lose interest in it," Sharon said. "But the dogs have made the physiotherapy so much more fun. We're so thrilled our little girl can finally walk."

About 15 patients have taken part in AAT since it began in 2007.

Len and Sheila Mills are two other Delta volunteers who bring Miss Dolly and Miss Marigold, two miniature long haired Dachshunds, into the hospital to work with the children.

"It's a new world to us. We began work on the AAT program in September last year, and the whole thing has been wonderful. Just to look at one child's face, to see just one smile is a privilege. Their eyes are bright and they don't fear the way that we do. They're special children and we've learnt so much from it all. It's given us all a new lease on life!"
Sheila Mills, Delta Animal Assisted Therapy

Benefits of delivering to those in need of medical care

- Improves the physical, social, emotional and/or cognitive functioning of the patient, as well as providing educational and motivational effectiveness for participants
- Particularly benefits children who may find physiotherapy sessions challenging and would otherwise have difficulty reaching their rehabilitation goals
- Improves sense of wellbeing in volunteers



Tips

- Promote Animal Assisted Therapy to hospitals and nursing homes in your area
- Support and promote Delta Society Australia and other organisations that provide Animal Assisted Therapy

Web Links

The Children's Hospital at Westmead - www.chw.edu.au

Delta Society Australia - www.deltasocietyaustralia.com.au