

Caring Comes in All Forms (And on All Fours)

The new therapists at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital are compassionate, caring and . . . canine? Thanks to a new pet therapy program launched this summer at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital, patients are discovering the mental, physical and emotional benefits that only a canine companion can provide.

When Susan O'Connor-Chadwick pulls out the brightly colored leash, Gertie, her fun-loving golden doodle, knows it's time to go work. While some people dread going to work, Gertie can't wait to visit all her adoring fans at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital (EMH). Gertie is one of ten dogs that are part of Elmhurst Memorial Hospital's pet therapy program, which provides a unique type of therapy for patients.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT), also known as pet therapy, utilizes specially trained animals and handlers to achieve specific physical, social, cognitive and emotional goals with patients. Studies have shown that physical contact with a pet can reduce stress, pain, anxiety and blood pressure. Pet therapy also brings comfort, diminishes depression, reduces boredom and increases socialization.

"Pet therapy programs have a huge impact on the patient's sense of well-being. Everyone we see has a positive response to the visit," said Susan. "Patients love everything about the visit, from the fact that Gertie has her own hospital photo ID, to how she responds to commands, and especially how she makes them feel when she looks at them with her big brown eyes."

Just as a doctor goes to medical school, handlers and their pets go through a rigorous training in order to hold the title of pet therapist. Dogs are tested for temperament and need to master basic obedience, such as sitting and staying on command. Hospitals are full of strange smells, activities and sounds. Dogs are also prepared

to handle loud alarms and other noises, and are calm in new environments and with new people. Handlers learn how to talk with patients and medical staff, and commit hours of their time to training their dogs.

Since the program started in July 2012, more than 486 patients have received visits from these cute and cuddly therapists. Ranging in sizes from an 85-pound Labrador Retriever named Rufus to a 15-pound Shih Tzu and poodle mix named Pepper Jack Davis, EMH therapy dogs provide a ton of love and support to our patients in a variety of different forms.

"Being a part of the pet therapy program at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital makes me really feel like I am making a difference," said Susan. "Sometimes our visits with patients last only a few minutes, but you can tell that it made their day." Patients should check with their nurse to see if they meet the criteria to have a visit from our pet therapists. Patient safety is always a top priority when it comes to receiving any kind of care or treatment. ::



Make a difference in a patient's life today by donating to Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare's Animal-Assisted Therapy Program. Designate your donation by visiting the Elmhurst Memorial Hospital Foundation website at www.emhfoundation.org.