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# Pets as Therapy

Many pet owners will attest to the benefits of having a pet to come home to. There's nothing like having a cat brushing against your legs or the welcome of a waggy dog tail.

There have been many studies on the therapeutic benefits of having a pet. A recent study centred on heart patients to determine the potential benefits of animal-assisted therapy. UCLA Medical Centre researchers studied 76 hospitalised patients, comparing their reactions to a 12-minute visit from a person and a dog, a person or no visit at all. No surprise that anxiety scores dropped 24 percent among the patients that had a visit from the person-dog team. The person only group dropped by only 10 percent and patients who had no visit registered no drop at all.

Velma's Pets as Therapy program is a Sydney-based service that started in the late nineties. It grew from its founder, Velma Harris' belief and own experience that a pet can make a significant difference to the physical and mental well being to sick and lonely people. As she explains, "Ten years ago I developed an illness called Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and that put me in bed for almost three years. During that time my white miniature poodle, Honey, was my constant companion and kept my spirits up. When I began to get better I realised that she was really important to my recovery. She was responsible for keeping my sanity and helping me through it."

From there Velma realised that people who didn't have access to pets would benefit from regular 'visits'. "I started visiting a nursing home with a friend's dog who was the most outgoing and friendly little dog. This engaging little Maltese, Max, was a delight for the people in the home. Soon word got around and we were invited to visit other nursing homes and our visits started to grow."

It's a harsh reality that when people become sick and have to be hospitalised, or admitted to an aged care facility, they have to give up their pets. "We get a lot of emotional reactions from people who've had to leave their pets behind. Often we have the same volunteer and pet visit the same facility and the patients develop a strong connection and rapport with the visiting pet. There's an attachment that occurs and often they'll request a photo to keep."

"Dogs cut through the communication barrier, pain and help people who are suffering with severe depression. I've witnessed patients that are ordinarily unresponsive to people become animated when they're visited by pets. To touch fur can elicit such positive responses."

Over the years, Velma estimates they've trained about 600 volunteers to help with the program. At present they have close to fifty actively participating in the program operating from the Central Coast right down to the Southern Highlands. "We're always looking for more volunteers to assist us." Velma's quick to point out that very specific training is required. "It's not just a matter of walking a well trained dog into a nursing home. We need highly

skilled people who undertake a 'Pets As Therapy' course where training involves health and safety procedures. That's our highest level of volunteer personnel but we also need other volunteers. These can be people who help us with awareness days and fund raising."

It's not just dogs that are welcomed into the Pets As Therapy program. They've regularly used rats, guinea pigs and rabbits. "The pets we use just have to be friendly and like meeting all sorts of people" says Velma.

Velma's Pets As Therapy program is self-funded with no funding from government so they rely on fund-raising to cover

costs. "We have a couple of sponsors—several vet practices assist us and we recently secured Supercoat as a major sponsor. They've been responsible for us getting into more facilities."

Pets are a great comfort and even short-term exposure can have positive side effects. They make people happier, calmer and feel more loved. That is a huge benefit when you're depressed, scared or not feeling well.

For more information on Velma's Pets As Therapy services please go to [www.velmaspetsastherapy.com.au](http://www.velmaspetsastherapy.com.au) phone: 9418 4343

