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Bow-wows help ease hospital patients' boo-boos

By Ellen Gilmer, The Oregonian

October 27, 2009, 8:30PM



RANDY L. RASMUSSEN/The Oregonian

Bonnie, an 11-year-old border collie, sports her official hospital badge showing that she has been certified as a therapy dog.

CEDAR MILL -- Samantha sits in a hospital bed, an IV in her arm, nurses and therapists bustling in and out, and a smiling dog at her feet. Four-year-old Samantha is undergoing growth hormone testing, and Bonnie the border collie is there to calm her nerves.

Hormone testing can take up to five hours, so Samantha's parents are thankful Bonnie is there.

"It's a good distraction from the monotony of the day," said her mother, Colette Verbanic of Tigard. "At 4 years old, it's hard to sit still for five hours."

Five days a week, a dog can be found trotting in and out of patient rooms at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center. The hospital has used animal-assisted therapy, a volunteer program that brings in animals to relax



RANDY L. RASMUSSEN/The Oregonian
Samantha Verbanic, 4, gets a high-five from her dog Bonnie. Susan Moore, who learned to pet Bonnie the border collie Sunday, is the director of volunteer services at St. Vincent, said Verbanic, said she's thankful for the visit from Bonnie and her handler, Susan Moore (right).

patients, for at least 10 years.

Samantha, who doesn't have a dog at home, got to meet Bonnie and owner Susan Moore of Beaverton. Samantha laughed and swatted at Bonnie. She hasn't learned how to pet gently yet, but Bonnie didn't seem to mind.

Bonnie visits children to try to distract them from blood draws, IV starts and other procedures. Therapy dogs not only cheer up and distract patients, but also actually lower pulse rates and offer warmth in cold hospital rooms, said child life specialist Barbara Blair.

"Nobody's focused on the procedure; they're just focused on the dog," Moore said.

According to research from the Delta Society, a national human services organization that connects people to animals, animal-assisted therapy has been shown to improve physical, social, emotional and cognitive functioning in patients. By offering companionship and a warm touch, animals help alleviate loneliness, lower blood pressure and reduce stress.

including Legacy Emanuel and OHSU Hospital.

The practice is common at many area hospitals,

Susan Moore, director of volunteer services at St. Vincent, said the hospital's use of therapy dogs has always been popular.

"We're wanting to look at all aspects of healing, not just the medical side," she said. "It's one more element of healing, and it's refreshing."

Not just any dog can handle the task.

"It really takes a special dog to do this," Moore said. "Therapy dogs are born. Some dogs just have that connection with people."

Eleven-year-old Bonnie certainly does. She always smiles, and she makes eye contact with everyone she visits.

Frank, a 3-year-old Bernese mountain dog, visits every Wednesday with his owner, Carly Morrish of Portland. They've been coming since February.

Kids love Frank, who weighs about 120 pounds. Sometimes he even hops into bed with toddlers.

Does your dog have what it takes?

Heather Toland, director of DoveLewis' animal therapy program, says you'll know when your dog is a puppy if it has the right personality for animal-assisted therapy. Therapy dogs must be calm in social situations, obedient and friendly.

Training is free but rigorous for certification through the DoveLewis

As Audrya Owens, 14, waited for surgery, she welcomed Frank into her room. This isn't the Vernonia girl's first experience with a therapy dog.

Aurora Owens took a picture of Audrya and Frank with her cell phone, recalling when her daughter was in the hospital at 18 months old, and a golden retriever was brought in to cheer her up. The dogs are a great distraction, she said.

Bonnie and Frank have more than just sunny personalities; they also have training and certification under their collars. Both completed basic obedience classes as puppies, then took animal-assisted therapy classes with their owners at DoveLewis, a Portland animal hospital. The hospital uses a training program from the Delta Society.

Training the owner is half the challenge. Owners must know how to present their animals in different social settings, said Heather Toland, director of the therapy program at DoveLewis. They must also be able to tell when their animals are tired or stressed.

Moore said she knows Bonnie, who has been working as a therapy dog five years, well enough to read her mood from the set of her ears or the way her tail moves. If Bonnie seems overwhelmed, Moore knows to take her away from patients.

Bonnie doesn't often get overwhelmed, though, and that's what makes her a good therapy dog.

Her biggest hurdle? Getting used to crowded elevators. Now she handles them in stride. And she springs up to the reception counter every week for a treat, a simple thank-you for a job well done.

-- **Ellen Gilmer**

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programs. First, volunteers meet with Toland for an interview to assess their pet's skills and temperament.

Then they attend two classes: one to review the dog's skills and basic commands, the other to teach the owner how to handle the dog in a treatment setting.

Finally, dogs practice with hospital equipment, such as beds and wheelchairs, before being sent to an assisted-living community for a field trip.

The dog and handler must pass a final evaluation, Delta Society's Pet Partners Skill and Aptitude Test. The dog also must undergo a thorough vet exam, which is repeated annually.

Volunteer commitment varies according to the hospital. Animal-assisted therapy typically is arranged through the volunteer services department.