

A Patient's Best Friend

Bringing pet therapy to cancer centers

BY JULIE BULGER



Andy and Cooper. Laura and Dixie. Michelle and Swoosh. These are household names at the Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center, and they are just a few of our 18 famous and wildly popular pet therapy teams visiting patients who receive chemotherapy treatments.

When I first started working at Vanderbilt in 2003, I heard about a “secret” happening in the cancer clinic: there was a volunteer bringing her dog in to visit the infusion room. This volunteer was the “friend of a friend” of the charge nurse and would occasionally be allowed into the clinic. At first, I thought this meant a lot of slobbering and barking, and at a time when infusion rooms were simply recliners set in a circle, I worried that this could be disruptive to patients during treatment. But on days when the volunteer and her dog visited, the clinic was instead filled with giggles and glee.

The staff was afraid that if the “secret” of these visits got out, the program would end. But with some determination and to the staff’s delight, the opposite happened. The smiling faces of patients, their obvious joy and laughter, and the welcome distraction that the dogs and handlers created outweighed the negatives. Thus, Vanderbilt’s Pet Therapy program was born.

The Benefits of Pet Therapy

The benefits of a formal pet therapy program are obvious—it defines personalized care. Animal visits bring joy to patients during some of their most difficult days, enhancing

social and emotional well-being and relieving stress. And though it’s all about the patient at Vanderbilt, it’s not just patients who benefit. It’s their family members, the caregivers who drive two hours each way just to spend eight hours in clinic receiving chemotherapy and seeing providers. They are scared and weary, trying valiantly to “stay strong.” Getting to play with a pet while they wait can relieve stress and reinvigorate them for the days to come.

Pet therapy is also for the nurses, medical assistants, and front desk staff, all of whom love having a five-minute reprieve from their hectic work days. Teresa Szychalski, RN, infusion clinic charge nurse at Vanderbilt Health, says, “The vibe of the clinic changes when one of our pet teams enters the door. There is kind of a lightness felt by everyone, including the nurses and staff. Many patients come with a lot of anxiety on their chemo days, and I see how a visit from one of our furry friends just melts that away.”

“I have personally seen magical moments between my dog and a patient,” says volunteer Laura Meadors about her black Labrador retriever, Dixie. “Some have even brought me to tears. Yes, there are times when I’ve seen patients that are sad, worried, upset, or just feel bad. I am not always sure how to handle that as a volunteer, but Dixie just makes that moment easier for both sides.”

Says Victoria Harris, who visits with her dog Spanky, “When patients or a staff member say things like, ‘Y’all have really made my day’ or ‘this is exactly what I

needed today; that’s when I feel it is truly worth it. I personally know what it’s like to sit in an infusion chair; therefore, I realize how rewarding it is to have the company of a sweet four-legged animal as a visitor.”

Formalizing Pet Therapy

I’m often asked by staff at other cancer hospitals or programs how to implement a similar program at their site or how we benchmark our program’s successes. Here are a few how-to tips for those looking to implement pet therapy:

- Your first step is to have the support of the senior leadership team. Next, begin collaborating with infection control and legal counsel. Legal will want to ensure and document the liability limits that registered pet therapy teams have.
- Ensure that pet therapy is part of your organizational animal visitation policies. Currently, many hospitals are revisiting these policies to define the differences between emotional support animals, pet therapy animals, facility animals, and service animals.
- Document clear and specific volunteer service descriptions, training requirements, and infection control practices vetted through legal, infection control, and policy development.
- Only accept pet teams that are trained and registered with national pet therapy programs. We cannot be in the business of training pet therapy teams, and they must be trained—none of our therapy dogs bark, slobber, or drool. We do not accept dogs solely on the basis of passing the American Kennel Club’s Canine Good

Citizen program or obedience training, no matter how much the handler insists that the dog is qualified. In Nashville, we are fortunate to have local affiliate organizations that evaluate and register teams with Pet Partners and Intermountain Therapy Animals. Once pet therapy teams have passed their evaluation and register, we begin the stringent screening and training process to become a Vanderbilt Volunteer Pet Team. This process takes six months; it is long, but it is critical to ensuring safety and quality.

- All teams complete Vanderbilt's Volunteer Services screening process (i.e., background checks; required immunizations; hospital-specific orientation like Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and confidentiality, infection control, and maintaining boundaries). Teams are scheduled to visit on the same day and time each week.
- Pet teams are placed in and only visit areas that have been pre-approved by Volunteer Services. We train volunteers how to act when an unapproved physician or family member pleads with them to come make a special visit; that can be very difficult for a volunteer who is here to help. We have areas that are strictly off-limits to pet visitation (intensive care units, myelosuppression, etc.) and areas where we have a staff member who is afraid of animals.
- As part of the volunteer training, we require a two-step shadowing process. All new volunteer handlers shadow a current team; that team then shadows and evaluates the new team on their first shift.

- It's important to support, celebrate, and recognize the invaluable contributions of your volunteer pet teams. Yes, they receive lots of immediate gratification for this work, but we can never appreciate their time and contributions enough. For example, one of our staff members is also a professional photographer and a huge fan of pet therapy. We created a photo shoot "set," and she offered a photo shoot with the handlers and their dogs. The volunteers were so grateful to have a beautiful photo just in time for holiday cards!

In 2017, ACCC invited us to bring a few pet teams to the 34th National Oncology Conference held in Nashville. After several days in high-level, heavy thinking meetings, why not end the conference by offering some on-site pet therapy for attendees?

Some of the most brilliant minds in cancer care—clinicians, researchers, administrators—immediately felt comfortable playing with these pets. Yes, there is invaluable research being done on the positive effects of pet therapy on patients in healthcare facilities, but watching conference attendees that day provided further proof of how therapy pets can bring out the best in people. They help people relax, relieve stress, and create memorable connections.

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Swoosh.



Cooper and nurses.



Yellow Lab at the 2017 ACCC National Oncology Conference, Nashville, Tenn.



Pet therapy visit with Spanky.