

## Aging Matters

Addressing issues related to geropsychiatry and the well-being of older adults

Beginning with this issue, *Aging Matters* has a new column editor, **Jeanne M. Sorrell, PhD, RN, FAAN**. Learn more about Dr. Sorrell in the Sidebar on page 18.

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# The Healing Power of Dogs Cocoa's Story

“Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.”

~ **Roger Caras**, Emmy-award-winning broadcaster and host of the annual Westminster Dog Show, as well as 14th President of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

For centuries, animals have provided companionship and unconditional love. Jorgenson (1997) noted that we have shared a common space and history with animals since animals were domesticated more than 12,000 years ago. Animals have been important in the spiritual and secular lives of human beings, and their therapeutic value has been observed for many years (Connor & Miller, 2000). In her journals, Florence Nightingale recorded her adoption of animals for her own companionship and enjoyment, and she encouraged her patients to care for animals, because she considered it a great benefit to recovery

(Stanley-Hermanns & Miller, 2002). While research supports the positive effect of animals on the reduction of stress (Siegel, 1990; Voelker, 1995), blood pressure, and the improvement of morale (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980), in the high-tech world of health care, the value of animals can be easily overlooked. In this article, we present a brief introduction to pet therapy and then Cocoa's story, told in her own words.

### PET THERAPY

Pet therapy has many names, such as pet-assisted therapy, animal-assisted therapy, and animal visitation. While differentiation



is made between some of these terms, depending on the goals of the interaction, the bond that develops between animal and client is evident. As Smoyak

**PAMELA R. CANGELOSI, PhD, RN, AND CAROLYN N. EMBREY**

## MEET THE NEW COLUMN EDITOR

Beginning with this issue, Jeanne M. Sorrell, PhD, RN, FAAN, is the new editor of *Aging Matters*. She is Associate Dean of Academic Programs and Research at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, and believes the best thing about her job is her interactions with faculty, students, and staff. Her first job was as a staff nurse in 12-bed intensive care unit, but her favorite position is the one she has now. She believes the most important attributes needed in her job are the ability to balance many responsibilities at one time, resourcefulness, and patience.

Her colleagues would describe her as creative, resourceful, and thoughtful, and she says the one thing that would improve her working life is "more time!" Dr. Sorrell says the phrase she uses most at work is "thank you" because she interacts with so many people to obtain information, delegate tasks, and so forth. If she were not a nurse, Dr. Sorrell says she would like to be an engineer and she relaxes by reading, writing, and listening to music.

Dr. Sorrell has contributed to JPN in the past, as the author of "Struggling to Do the Right Thing: Stories from People Living with Alzheimer's Disease" for *Aging Matters* in July 2005 (Vol. 43, No. 7, pp. 13-16). She is excited about serving as editor of *Aging Matters* because she enjoys having the opportunity to mentor others in writing for publication. In her new role, she hopes to be able to mentor both new and experienced authors to write insightful pieces that will be appealing to JPN readers. She likes JPN because it is very readable and contains timely, clinically relevant, well-researched information. Please join all of us at JPN in welcoming Dr. Sorrell!



(2003) described, animals help people overcome isolation, develop trust, and increase their confidence, which, for some animals, can also be reciprocal. The Web sites listed in the **Sidebar** on page 20 provide information about the different types of pet therapy programs in the United States. Certification can be obtained through the most common certifying organizations in the United States: Therapy Dogs International, the Delta Society, and Therapy Dogs, Inc.

One pet therapy program, the Loudoun Volunteer Caregivers Pet Therapy Program, located in Loudoun County, Virginia, sent therapy dogs to the Pentagon after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in Washington, DC (Wid-

halm, 2002). The dogs were present during briefings to help calm family members of victims, and children could talk to the dogs, even though they might have difficulty expressing their feelings to adults. This article provides a reflection of one dog's experience with the Loudoun Pet Therapy program. Although Cocoa was engaged in other work during the Pentagon briefing and was not able to be present there, her story conveys the special healing power that pets offer daily.

### COCOA

Cocoa, a 9-year-old female Cardigan Welsh Corgi, is a volunteer with the Loudoun Volunteer Caregivers Pet Therapy Program. Certified by Therapy

Dogs International, Cocoa visits residents in several assisted living facilities, a group mental health home, and homes of frail older adults. She has even made visits to hospital emergency departments and oncology facilities. This type of work is not for every dog. To be certified as a therapy dog, both the dogs and their human partners are tested to see how they work together, and the dogs are tested to determine whether their temperament is suitable for work in health care settings. Unusual noises and odors, physical contact with strangers, and medical equipment, such as wheelchairs, all must be easily tolerated. In addition, every therapy dog must be in excellent health, well groomed, and examined at least annually by a veterinarian (Connor & Miller, 2000). Cocoa passed her certification tests with flying colors and now enjoys the benefits of therapy work.

When Cocoa's human partner was asked about her work as part of a human/canine team, she thought Cocoa would like to describe their therapy visits herself. Her story is presented in the following section. After reading Cocoa's "thoughts," the impact of this pet therapy program will be evident.

### COCOA'S STORY

When I first began visiting assisted living facilities, I was amazed at how eager the residents were to see me. Elderly women in wheelchairs, men with canes, and even the nurses all came to pet me, talk to me, and even brush my coat. I like to hear these people reminisce about the people and animals they have known throughout their lives. Some laugh when they talk about the antics of their pets, and some become sad as they remember a beloved pet that has long since been gone. I like to snuggle close to those who seem sad or gently



touch their hand with my paw. I admit, I love the attention, but I derive great satisfaction from comforting someone who is lonely, and I love to help someone remember happy times.

#### **Frank**

Frank\* is one man I will never forget. He is an elderly gentleman who always sat quietly on the other side of the room from me and rarely interacted with the pet therapy group. Each week, he was invited to sit closer, but he always politely declined. Finally, after several months, Frank did change his seat. Each successive week, he would move closer, until finally he took the chair next to mine. I was so thrilled, but I restrained my exuberance so as not to make Frank uncomfortable. The next thing I knew, Frank was lightly touching me.

In the following weeks, Frank initiated sitting next to me and slowly began to join in the conversation. Haltingly, Frank would share stories of his life. The most remarkable revelation came one day when another person in the group asked him about the pets he had owned. He recounted that his family had a dog when he was growing up. He then paused and frowned, and shared in hushed tones that he remembered his father, in anger, had thrown the dog down a long flight of stairs in the house Frank grew up in. Everyone was stunned by Frank's story. I just snuggled closer to Frank. To this day, I am pleased that Frank felt comfortable enough with me and the other group members to share this painful memory. He has continued in our group, always sits next to me, and joins in all of our conversations and activities. I feel I have a very special bond with Frank.

\* Names changed for anonymity purposes.



*“I admit I love the attention, but I derive great satisfaction from comforting someone who is lonely, and I love to help someone remember happy times.”*

*~ Cocoa*

#### **Mrs. Sliger**

Mrs. Sliger is another person I am very fond of. Mrs. Sliger lives in a different assisted living facility. She is reclusive, preferring to remain in her room, even for meals. The nurses believed she would enjoy a visit from me, so my human partner and I would stop in Mrs. Sliger's room after every group therapy session. Mrs. Sliger would pet me, smile, and talk with my partner about how much she liked dogs. She always spoke so kindly to me, as well.

As the weeks passed, Mrs. Sliger became aware of my visitation schedule and began to

wait for me at the door of her room. Then she waited for me outside the community room where our group met until the group therapy session was over. With more time, she tentatively peeked inside the room, and one day she just came in and joined the group. I was so happy that I wagged and wagged my tail! Now Mrs. Sliger is usually one of the first to join us, and she always spends part of the time stroking my coat, smiling, and speaking kindly to me. I always greet her with a great big wag of my tail to let her know how happy I am to see her.

## SELECTED PET THERAPY WEB SITES

### Delta Society

<http://www.deltasociety.org>

### Education Resource Center

<http://www.erc.calgary.ab.ca/Web%20Links/web%20links%20pet%20therapy.htm>

### Therapy Dogs, Inc.

<http://www.therapydogs.com>

### Therapy Dogs International, Inc.

<http://www.tdi-dog.org>

## Interactions with Staff

I even like to interact with the nurses and staff in the facilities we visit. I really like the cook in one assisted living facility. He scowled at me the first time I came, and I felt so uncomfortable. Maybe he thought we would disrupt his serving times for meals. Each week, he would observe us in group therapy, but he would never talk to me or my human partner. One day, he put a bowl of water on the floor for me, which I greatly appreciated, because I do get thirsty in the warm facilities. I wagged my tail for him, too. Now he not only has water for me, but a treat as well. He smiles and pets me during each visit. Sometimes he even laughs! Now I do not feel uncomfortable anymore, and everyone in the group seems happier.

Pet therapy has become a vital part of my life. I look forward to visiting with everyone. Both my human partner and I are dedicated to our pet therapy work and have witnessed many therapeutic benefits, which also extend to me. I love being with people, responding to their touch and providing a warm gentle gaze that accepts people as they are.

## SUMMARY

Animals bring a sense of “at homeness” and even normalcy

to people who are hospitalized or live in health care facilities. Illnesses, separation from family, fear, loneliness, and even depression may be lessened for those who receive a therapy dog visit by providing a welcome change in routine and something to look forward to. Individuals are often more active and responsive during and after a visit. Just stroking and petting a dog requires the use of hands and arms, as well as the motions of stretching and turning. Dogs are also unconcerned with age or physical ability; they accept people as they are. This alone causes many to reach out and interact with dogs. Animals provide a focus for conversation and a common interest.

As Cocoa’s human partner can attest, a pet also makes it easier for strangers to talk. Cocoa is known by so many people at the facilities she visits that residents’ family members often stop to talk with “Cocoa’s mom” when they meet her in the community, asking questions about how Cocoa is doing. When Cocoa is no longer able to perform her services, many in her community will mourn.

Cocoa’s story, as well as the limited research literature, supports the positive physical and psychological effects of animals, but continued research on the effect of therapy animals on health outcomes is needed. As advocates for clients, nurses are in key positions to facilitate the inclusion of animals in clients’ care. Although not for everyone, including those who react negatively to animals or who are allergic, pet therapy offers important possibilities for providing holistic care that extends not only to clients, but also to family members and staff, and to the pets themselves.

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