Recovering with 4-legged friends requires less pain medication

November 16 2009

Adults who use pet therapy while recovering from total joint-replacement surgery require 50 percent less pain medication than those who do not. These findings were presented at the 18th Annual Conference of the International Society of Anthrozoology and the First Human Animal Interaction Conference (HAI) in Kansas City, Mo.

"Evidence suggests that animal-assisted therapy (AAT) can have a positive effect on a patient's psychosocial, emotional and physical well being," said Julia Havey, RN, study presenter and senior systems analyst, Department of Medical Center Information Systems, Loyola University Health System (LUHS). "These data further support these benefits and build the case for expanding the use of pet therapy in recovery."

Animal lover Havey, and colleague Frances Vlasses, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, began raising puppies to become assistance dogs more than a decade ago through a program called Canine Companions for Independence (CCI). The non-profit organization provides highly trained assistance dogs to people with physical and developmental disabilities free of charge.

"As nurses, we are committed to improving the quality of life for others," said Vlasses, associate professor & chair of Health Systems Management and Policy, Loyola University Chicago Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing. "This service experience has provided us with a unique way to combine our love for animals with care for people with special needs.

In addition to the financial obligations that go along with raising a puppy, Havey and Vlasses take the dogs to class and teach them house and public etiquette until they are old enough to enter a formal training program.

"You might see our four-legged friends around Loyola's campus from time to time," said Havey, RN, senior systems analyst, Department of Medical Center Information Systems, LUHS. "Part of our responsibility as volunteers is to acclimate these dogs to people. The Loyola community has so graciously supported this training and the use of service dogs on campus."

When the dogs are approximately 15 months of age, Havey and Vlasses return them to CCI's regional training center for six to nine months where they are trained to be one of four types of assistance dogs.

Service dogs are trained to assist with physical tasks and provide social support to their partners. These dogs learn 40 commands to enhance the independence of people with ailments ranging from spinal cord injuries to multiple sclerosis.

Facility dogs are trained to work with a professional in a visitation, education or health- care setting. They can perform more than 40 commands designed to motivate, rehabilitate or soothe clients with special needs.

Skilled companion dogs are trained to work with an adult or child with a disability under the guidance of a facilitator. Disabilities served include cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, autism and Down's syndrome. A skilled companion also can serve as a social bridge to people who are not used to relating to a person with disabilities.

Hearing dogs are trained to recognize and alert partners to various

sounds, such as a doorbell, alarm clock or smoke alarm. The average service life of each dog is eight years. After that time, the dog retires to live out its golden years as a pet.

Havey and Vlasses believe that animal-assisted therapy will ultimately become a standard of care for healing. The pair will continue to advocate for this therapeutic option through public speaking engagements and philanthropic work.

Source: Loyola University Health System ([news](#) : [web](#))