

When a wet nose is a good thing

Therapy Dogs Make Rounds in Burn/Trauma Unit

By Joelle Klein

When Debbie Schwartz, RN, a University of Colorado Hospital ICU nurse and pet therapy handler, enters the hospital with her dog Kelty, a gorgeous black and white Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix, it can take her 15 minutes to travel just a few doors down to the Volunteer Office to check in. Everyone – patients, visitors, doctors, nurses – wants to say hello and pet her companion.



ICU Nurse and pet therapy volunteer Debbie Schwartz, RN, poses with her best friend and volunteer partner, Kelty.

“I’ve seen doctors actually line up to pet our therapy dogs,” says Volunteer Services and Information Desk Manager Rita Alexander.

To be sure, Kelty and the other 11 therapy dogs that are part of the hospital’s Therapy Tails group are so popular because they are adorable and friendly (they have to be to be therapy dogs). But a good part of their charm lies in the fact that seeing a dog at a hospital is such an unexpected treat.

And if a hospital is one of the last places you’d expect to see a dog, then the Burn/Trauma Unit is probably the last place you’d expect them to be visiting patients.

But Burn Unit Medical Director, Gordon Lindberg, MD, and Burn Unit Nurse Manager Mary Holden, RN, have been lobbying to have therapy dogs in their unit for the last two years.

“We’ve all wanted to have [a therapy dog] up here for many years. We had pet therapy in the burn unit where I trained in San Diego and everyone was just tickled pink to see the dog,” says Lindberg.

Spirit boosters. Alexander, who has been working with therapy dogs in the UCH Volunteer Services Department for the last seven years, explains that therapy dogs are different than the more commonly seen service dogs. While service dogs help owners with certain medical conditions, like blindness, therapy dogs visit with patients to bolster their spirits.

The UCH therapy dogs and their owners have visited patients and their visitors in several departments, including the SICU, the MICU, Neurology, Rehabilitation Medicine, Oncology, Geriatrics, and the Center for Dependency, Addiction and Rehabilitation (CeDAR) as well as the Cardiac and Vascular Center waiting room over the years. But Alexander never thought she’d see the day when the dogs were allowed on the Burn Unit.

“It was always thought that the Burn Unit was so protective of their patients and having dogs up there would not be a good idea. I never, ever, thought we’d be up there,” says Alexander.

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But after they got the thumbs up from infection control staff, it was decided that Schwartz and Kelty would be the best team to start making rounds.

“Debbie is a surgical ICU nurse so we thought she and her dog were the perfect candidates to visit up there and Debbie discussed with Mary [Holden] about what her expectations were, so for now it’s only Debbie that goes up,” explains Alexander.

Dog days. Schwartz and Kelty began visiting Burn Unit patients early this month. So far, it’s been a big success. As on the other units, the dogs bolster the patients’ spirits and bring smiles to the faces of the doctors, nurses and other medical staff as well. There is no one who doesn’t light up when Kelty comes prancing down the hallway.



Burn Unit patient Jennifer Perrea was thrilled to see, and pet, Kelty again.

Staff take special precautions with the dogs to prevent infection. All therapy dogs, regardless of which unit they visit, must be bathed 24 hours prior to their hospital visit to reduce the risk of contamination. Schwartz avoids rooms that have contact precautions or patients whose burns are too extensive. And she always checks with the charge nurse to make sure the visit would be a positive experience for the patient.

“I’ve had experience as a burn nurse in the past and I’m very comfortable in there and if I’m comfortable my dog will be comfortable and that makes us an even better therapy team,” says Schwartz, who has been a pet therapy volunteer for about a year.

On a recent morning Schwartz and Kelty entered a patient’s room after checking with the charge nurse to see which patients would welcome a furry visitor. He’s tentative at first – not sure what to make of a dog in the hospital. But then Kelty does her magic and

the patient starts smiling and petting her and telling Schwartz about the dog he used to have.

The second patient, Jennifer Perrea, has met Kelty before and is excited to see him again. “He’s so sweet and pretty. He’s a good dog,” says Perrea as she pets Kelty’s back and rubs her ears. “He cheers me up.”

Perrea’s stepmother, who’s visiting at the time, says she’s never seen her stepdaughter light up so much.

And Schwartz seems equally buoyed by the encounter.

“I get a lot of things back as a nurse, but when I’m here with Kelty, it’s tenfold the feeling because I know if you’re a dog person or you’re just needing a little bit of happiness, pet therapy is amazing,” she says. “I’m really looking forward to doing more visits.”