



*Enriching lives through animal companionship*

**Pets as Therapy**  
*South Africa*



## **Frequently Asked Questions About Pets as Therapy**

### **What is Pets as Therapy?**

**Pets as Therapy (PAT)** was launched in South Africa in 2001. We are a registered Not for Profit Organisation (NPO), as well as a registered Public Benefit Organisation (PBO).

**PAT** organises therapeutic visits by pet owners who volunteer to take their pets (mainly dogs) to visit people in hospitals, hospices, retirement homes, frail care facilities, special needs schools residential centres, and a variety of other venues. **PAT** visits bring company, support, comfort, pleasure, stress relief and stimulation to those living either permanently or temporarily in these and other establishments.

There is a fortune of scientific evidence showing that the interaction between people and pets is therapeutic – physically, emotionally, psychologically and socially.

### **Why take animals to facilities?**

Visiting with animals can help people feel less lonely, and less depressed. Visits from pets can provide a welcome change from routine, or the renewal of old friendships. People become more active and responsive both during and after visiting with animals.

An animal visit can offer entertainment or a welcome distraction from pain and infirmity. People often talk to the visiting pets, and share with them their thoughts and feelings and memories. Animal visits provide something to look forward to. Stroking a dog or cat can reduce a person's blood pressure, and petting encourages use of hands and arms, stretching and turning.

The visiting pet makes it easier for two strangers to talk. It gives people a common interest and provides a focus for conversation. Many people in hospitals or group homes have had to give up pet ownership and they miss the unconditional acceptance that a pet gives them. A dog pays little attention to age or physical ability, but accepts people just as they are. And the benefits continue long afterwards, leaving behind memories not only of the visit, but of past experiences. It offers something for people to share.

### **People talk about animal assisted activities (AAA) and animal assisted therapy (AAT). What's the difference?**

**Pets as Therapy** is involved in animal assisted activities which is the less formal of the two. Neither the human volunteer nor the visiting pet need specialised training. The interaction between animal and human is social and unstructured, but has therapeutic benefits - hence our name, "Pets as Therapy."

Animal assisted therapy is more formal. It usually involves one particular animal and handler assigned to a particular set of clients. There tend to be particular goals on which the team need to focus.

### **How does PAT operate?**

Most owners really love their pets and get so much pleasure from this relationship. Some feel that they want to share the joy and love of their animal companions with others. PAT's role is to help facilitate this process. Sometimes, it's really hard to phone an institution and say that you want to visit. There are also a whole range of issues that need to be considered such as:

- The suitability of the pet – its own temperament as well as the correct match between the pet and the clients. A docile elderly pooch will get overwhelmed in a children's home, and yet would be of great comfort in a frail care unit;
- The health of the pet – it wouldn't be appreciated if visiting pets caused a resident to get worms or started a flea epidemic! Nor would we want to stress any pet;
- The nature of the institution.

So Pets as Therapy assesses you and your animal companion as a team. We match you with an institution where all will benefit. We support you to ensure that you feel confident on visits, and provide ongoing support to you.

### **Where do we currently visit?**

More than 45 institutions in and around Cape Town are regularly visited including the Red Cross Children's Hospital Rondebosch, Huis Lückhoff Retirement Village Rosebank, St Dominic's School for the Deaf Tokai, Helen Keller Home for the Blind Pinelands, Alexandra Hospital and Includid Maitland, Huis Horizon Stellenbosch, Athlone School for the Blind, and House Hensie Vroom in Stickland, to name just a few.

We frequently review our list of facilities and will contact many more in the near future.

### **How much time is required?**

Any PAT interaction is better than none! As the impact of Pets as Therapy depends on frequency of contact, weekly visits would be ideal. Many of us lead busy lives and can only manage fortnightly or monthly visits. Some people walk through the institutions spending a few minutes with many people for about an hour. We don't want to exhaust or stress the pets, so an hour is usually enough time for a visit. Others spend much more time with a few people and the pets develop really close relationships with their "clients."

### **What is the process of joining?**

Once volunteers have made contact, we assess the pet. Basically any animal that is not aggressive, not too excitable, friendly, and under the control of the owners will be accepted. We need proof that vaccinations are up to date, that there is a parasite (fleas and ticks) control programme in place, and that the animal is healthy. The next step is two or three mentorship visits with experienced visitors to get the "feel" of what it takes. Then we discuss the institutional vacancies and match up the volunteer team.

We arrange to introduce the new team to the institution, accompany them for a visit or two to gain confidence. The team is then left to visit according to the arrangement set up between the team and the institution. We provide ongoing support through regular meetings and there is a membership fee. Current fees are available on the website. This is used to contribute towards annual public liability insurance fees.

### **What about people without pets or who have unsuitable pets?**

Running an organization takes a lot of time and effort, so we do need volunteers whom we call Friends of Pets as Therapy. They help with arranging events, recruiting, marketing, fund raising etc. So, Friends are welcome and necessary members of PAT.

Friends have all the rights to Pets as Therapy benefits which volunteers have, and can be elected to the executive.

**What is regarded as an “unsuitable pet?”**

Due to the nature of the activities and the potential stress on the pets, we do not assess dogs less than 18 months old. There is no upper age limit, but if an animal is showing signs of frailty, and the assessors feel that Pets as Therapy activities will be detrimental to his or her health, the pet will be deemed as being unsuitable. We cannot deem dogs that have been “guard-dog” trained as suitable; our public liability cover specifically excludes such animals.

Animals that are not current with their vaccinations, de-worming schedules and external parasite control are also regarded as unsuitable.

**Are there other activities associated with Pets as Therapy?**

Recruitment drives, gaining exposure and raising funds are all critical to the ongoing success of Pets as Therapy. We attend pet fairs, public events held by the SPCA, and have an annual book sale which raises the majority of our funds. We have informal links with animal welfare organisations, dog clubs, and organisations involved in human–animal interactions. There are great opportunities to develop closer relationships with these organisations. Like all Not for Profit Organisations, we are very short of funding and so donations are always gratefully accepted and acknowledged.

**What about ongoing support for members?**

We hold several meetings a year to discuss organisational issues and talks about our experiences. More social get-togethers to support members are planned for the future, such as picnics along with our pets, and social suppers.

**What about other pets?**

Evidence shows all pets have therapeutic impacts. PAT currently has two very elegant Siamese cats who love their therapeutic roles as visitors. However, they can occasionally cause allergic problems, so some institutions don't favour them.

Australians and certain American branches are quite big on white rats.... We have had no experience with these, but are willing to give it a try as well as parrots, canaries, cockatiels, rabbits, miniature goats, miniature Shetland ponies, or pot-bellied pigs!

**What else does PAT have to do?**

We need to get the basics right – get our brand known, promote the concept to institutions and then recruit many more volunteers to visit. There are so many opportunities in Cape Town and the surrounding areas. There are also many relationships to build between organisations with overlapping interests. Once we have Cape Town working well, we would like to open branches in other cities and towns around South Africa. Stellenbosch and Polokwane are already up and running!