



Therapy dog contacts

- PAWS FOR PEOPLE THERAPY DOGS**
Website: www.pawsforpeople.co.za
- PETS AS THERAPY (PAT) THERAPY DOGS**
Website: www.pat.org.za
- TOUCH OUR PETS (TOP DOGS)**
Website: www.therapytopdogs.co.za

Therapy dogs **TOUCH LIVES**

Animaltalk accompanies some of SA's amazing canine caregivers to hospitals and old age homes



From left to right - Jacque and Jason, Janine and Kenzo, Gill and Daisy, Noreen and Leo, Andrea and Anushka, Tracy with Nanuk and Sabrina, Vicky and Roxy, Loren and Azarro, Jade and Sabre



Did you know that children who are struggling to read can benefit from reading to a dog? Reading to dogs can help children develop their literacy skills and confidence in reading.

Dr Marieanna le Roux, researcher at the Department of Psychology at Stellenbosch University and chair of Pets As Therapy (PAT), completed her PhD studies on the effect of an animal-assisted reading programme on the reading skills of grade three learners in a Western Cape school. Four groups were assessed, one of which read to a dog. The results showed that the children in this group had better word

recognition and reading comprehension than the other three groups.

New volunteers are now being trained by PAT to expand the Lees-Ukufunda-READ programme, pioneered and known as READ in the United States, into other South African schools and libraries.

History of therapy dogs

Dogs have been assisting humans in their work and providing companionship and love for centuries. Therapy Dogs International, a volunteer organisation, was founded in 1976 by Elaine Smith in New Jersey in the United States. Smith, a nurse

in England, had witnessed how patients responded when the local chaplain visited care facilities with his Golden Retriever. Smith was determined to learn more about the benefits of animals in healing and pioneered the concept in the States.

The late Professor Johannes Odendaal was the first person in South Africa to begin research on therapy dogs and their benefits to patients. In 1998 Lesley de Klerk founded Paws for People, the first registered and insured therapy dog unit in South Africa. The organisation started with two handlers and has grown to over 150 dogs countrywide today.

Animal-assisted therapy and activities

Trained therapy dogs are not all pedigree dogs, but any trained dog with the correct temperament. Dogs are used in both animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activities (AAA).

Dr Marieanna le Roux explains that AAT is the more formal intervention of the two. This is done by a trained person, where there are specific goals for the intervention and the animal forms part of the treatment. Animal-assisted activities are more informal, meet-and-greet type visits. "Visiting a hospital with a therapy

Terrific Toby comforts a child



Toby (black Maltese Cross) and Murdoch (Dachshund) with Ruben and his mom at Netcare Unitas Hospital Paediatric Oncology

Tarryn Coutts works for Panorama Publications and takes care of advertisers in the company's animal titles. Tarryn, Ryan and their two-year-old daughter, Kyla, share their home with three dogs and two cats. Toby (7) was adopted from a rescue shelter and is now a trained therapy dog. Tarryn and Toby visit various care facilities and do pet education in schools with the team from Paws for People.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THERAPY DOG WORK?

Toby was adopted from a shelter when my husband and I moved into our house. I took him for training at Progressive Training School which is owned by Lesley de Klerk. It was here that I learned about Lesley's non-profit organisation called Paws for People and I knew that this was something I had to be involved with.

WHAT TRAINING DID TOBY HAVE AND WHY DID YOU THINK HE WOULD MAKE A GOOD THERAPY DOG?

Toby and I trained in obedience for six months. With this training I saw what a great temperament Toby has and how he

just loves people, and I knew I wanted to have him assessed to be a therapy dog.

CAN YOU RELATE A SPECIAL MOMENT YOU AND TOBY HAVE SHARED WITH A PATIENT?

We were at Unitas Hospital and we were asked if we could visit a patient in paediatric ICU. They had requested that a small dog come in as the patient could not get out of bed. The patient was a child, about eight years old. I put Toby on the bed. He is trained to lie completely still when he is visiting bed-ridden patients who have lots of tubes and pipes around them. I moved the patient's hand onto Toby and immediately, a positive reaction in the child's vital signs was evident. Toby was a star and was perfectly still while I moved the child's hand in a stroking motion. The parents then told us that the child is a huge animal lover and could not believe the positive reaction. I took Toby off the bed and held him where the child could still see him. The child maintained eye contact as we moved around the bed. The parents became very emotional and said this was the biggest response they had noted since the child had been hospitalised.



▼ Glenda Walters and her Labrador Sebastian enjoy their therapy dog visits to various facilities in Port Elizabeth



Sebastian warms a senior's heart

Glenda Walters is a Pets As Therapy (PAT) dog handler from Port Elizabeth. Her Labrador Retriever, Sebastian (8), accompanies her on visits to various care facilities in the city. Glenda and her husband Henry share their home with four Labradors. Sebastian has a Class A in obedience and his Canine Good Citizen Gold Level Certificate.

WHAT QUALITIES DO YOU THINK SEBASTIAN HAS THAT MAKE HIM A GREAT THERAPY DOG?

Sebastian is a very kind-natured, docile dog who loves to be cuddled and kissed. He loves to sit very close to me when I watch TV and is always lying by my feet under the desk while I am working. As long as I touch him, he is happy, the minute I stop, he will verbally let me know to continue. He is not shy to go to strangers, just to get a hug or kiss. He is also very tolerant with small children or elderly people who sometimes handle him roughly.

CAN YOU SHARE A STORY WHERE SEBASTIAN HAS HELPED A PATIENT HE VISITED?

We visited the old age facility where my mother lives on Christmas Day last year. I took Sebastian to the frail care centre there to say hello to the elderly people. We went to visit one of my mother's old friends. This elderly lady has Alzheimer's and was sitting in a wheelchair, staring in front of her. She did not recognise me at all when I greeted her. I went to sit next to her with Sebastian and started talking to her, but there was no response. I then took her hand and put it on Sebastian's head. She looked at him and then started talking, saying hello to him and telling him how naughty he was when he accidentally stepped on her foot. I gave her treats to give to Sebastian and I was rewarded with the warmest smile when he licked her hands. It was the best Christmas present I could ever have wished for. According to her daughter verbal communication with her is limited to a couple of words. It is amazing that the presence of a therapy dog can make such a difference in the lives of people.

dog or visiting an old age home falls under AAA," explains Dr Le Roux. "There might be therapy in the visit but it is not planned."

The psychological benefits that animals have on humans are well documented. Dr Le Roux says that just touching a friendly dog can help lower blood pressure and heart rate. "The visits from the dogs are good for depression, anxiety, loneliness and social interaction," she says. "The dogs can pick up on your mood or that of the patient or elderly person."

Therapy dog organisations will assess the temperament of the dog before he is matched to a care facility. Not all dogs

are comfortable in all situations and suitability must be considered. This is just as important for the handler. Visits can be very emotional, especially with sick children, the elderly or disabled patients.

Bringing comfort to patients

Health and hygiene is critical in any care facility and therapy dog handlers must follow the protocols as prescribed by the facility or hospital. Pets must be clean and groomed for the visit. Handlers also ensure that vaccinations are up to date and that pets are regularly dewormed and treated for parasites.

▼ Thandi comforts 16-month-old Lexine Mieny during a therapy dog visit to the paediatric ward



Thandi calms a patient

Angie Thornton of Touch Our Pets (TOP) therapy dogs and her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Thandi (8), enjoy their therapy visits on the East Rand. Angie and her husband immigrated to South Africa in 1991. They share their home with four Cavaliers – one in each colour.

WHAT QUALITIES MAKE THANDI A SPECIAL THERAPY DOG?

Thandi is very confident and outgoing. She reads body language very well and knows instinctively what people need, and reacts accordingly. She has taught me so much, rather than the other way round. She's also small and pretty and is very non-threatening, which helps with people who are afraid of dogs, and she's had great success with helping both adults and children to overcome

their fears. She 'talks' on command, which is very useful when she's working, as I can 'translate' to suit whatever is needed. She also 'sings' happy birthday and nursery rhymes, which the children can join in with. She even had a room full of pensioners singing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* once.

WHAT DO YOU THINK VISITS MEAN TO THE PATIENTS?

We were at a promotion over Christmas and one lady said she had read in the paper we would be there. She came especially to thank and tell us how much it meant to her to be visited by Thandi when she was in hospital waiting for an operation. She had been so nervous and apprehensive before the dogs came, but they had a calming effect on her, and she just wanted to let us know.

Many old age homes, orphanages, hospitals and special-needs facilities in South Africa do allow therapy dogs to visit the patients, but others do not. "It's not as difficult as before," says Lesley de Klerk. "There is still some lack of education surrounding dogs in hospitals and while it is still a challenge, we have seen an improvement."

Paws for People therapy dogs are welcome at The Glynnwood Hospital in Benoni. "We found that the dogs bring a calmness to the patients," says marketing manager Elbett Bole. "Sometimes the patients just sit

with the dogs and it seems as if emotional barriers are broken down. The dogs are extremely well trained and they soak up the cuddles by the patients." Before a therapy session, handlers report to the unit manager and patients have a choice whether to interact with the dogs or not. "We always get positive feedback from the patients," says Elbett. "Most of the patients have their own pets, and the long-term patients miss that companionship. I believe the dogs bring them comfort. On difficult days when the dogs just lie with the patients, you can see the comfort they bring." 🐾

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