

‘Doctor Peyo’ the Therapy Horse Comforts Cancer Patients in France



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You may have heard of therapy dogs, or even therapy pigs, but what about a therapy horse? Meet Peyo, the 15-year-old stallion who spends his days doing the rounds in Calais Hospital in France. He helps provide comfort to cancer patients who are nearing the end of their lives.

Peyo was originally trained to take part in equestrian shows, but his handler Hassen Bouchakour began to realize his horse had a different calling. After shows, Peyo would pick people out in a crowd and stay close to them. Bouchakour later realized that he was instinctively choosing people that were sick—either physically or mentally. The trainer gave up his career as a showman and decided to embrace Peyo’s special gift in order to help those who need it. Today, Bouchakour works with a therapeutic organization called Les Sabots du Coeur (the clogs of the heart), which is conducting a study of Peyo’s extraordinary abilities.

In 2016, Bouchakour and Peyo began volunteering at Calais Hospital almost every day, where they visit patients in the palliative care unit. The retired show horse—now nicknamed “Doctor Peyo”—tells his handler which patients need attention by standing by their door and raising one leg. “It was very complicated to no longer be the master, and to be forced to admit that when [Peyo] detects someone [is sick], I am no longer in control,” Bouchakour admits. “When he decides, I cannot hold him back, it’s a need, it’s visceral, it is in him, he needs to go, and cling on to the specific person he has chosen.”

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Hospitals are sterile environments, so Bouchakour has to spend around two hours preparing Peyo for each visit. He thoroughly cleans him using disinfectant wipes, and he’s even trained Peyo to signal when he needs the bathroom. When the horse needs to go, he moves his body from side to side and Bouchakour knows to take him outside.

For terminally ill patients who are nearing the end of their life, Peyo brings them final moments of joy and peace. And in some cases, his presence can reduce the patient’s pain so significantly that they no longer require strong drugs. “With Peyo, we try to recreate life at the end of life, in order to fight, and create an energy to accompany families and caregivers,” says Bouchakour. “I accompany him but I let him do what he wants, he’s the one who decides.”

Since beginning his career as a therapy horse, Peyo has supported more than 1,000 people during the last moments of their lives. Not only does Peyo help the sick, he’s also a true friend to his handler. “Peyo is my other half, he is my life partner,” Bouchakour admits. “He is everything to me.”