



Medicine for Managers

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Therapy Dogs

A therapy dog is a dog trained principally to provide support and comfort to people who are living in care homes or nursing homes, or who are in hospitals and hospices. Their purpose is to provide interaction with patients or residents and provide calmness, placidity, distraction and happiness through touching and enjoying the animal's company. Stroking a dog can relax and produce contentment in an individual.

Therapy dogs can be used to benefit people in a therapeutic way and they can be involved in a wide range of potential activities, such as visiting programmes or specific therapeutic activities.

Most therapy dogs used for therapeutic visiting are household pets and are used for socialisation and encouraging activity.

Other dogs are used to assist patients to achieve specific goals in their recovery from medical problems and help, for example, with the achievement of motor skills and hand-eye co-ordination.

Some dogs are used for facility therapy. They work with handlers in frail elderly and similar institutions to assist and support patients with Alzheimer's disease and other mental illnesses.

A therapy dog does **not** have the same status as an assistance dog. An **assistance dog** is trained to perform a specific task for a specific individual with a disability and the dog is usually qualified by a charitable organisation which is a member of Assistance Dogs UK.

An assistance dog may be for someone with a **specific disability** such as blindness and is specially trained to meet the explicit need to give greater independence.

*It might be used for **seizure alerts** and such dogs are extremely reliable and able to give prior warning of up to 45 minutes of an impending seizure, to enable the individual to find safety.*

They may provide safety in other medical conditions such as autism. An assistance dog is **permitted by law** to accompany its owner at all times and to all places. A therapy dog does **not** have the same legal rights and enters premises by invitation.

The use of therapy dogs was described by Florence Nightingale, who noted that psychiatric patients obtained anxiety relief with small animals. Freud used his dog to improve ambience and communication with patients.

The modern concept of therapy dogs is attributed to Elaine Smith, an American nurse who noted, whilst working in an English hospital, that when a Chaplain brought his golden retriever into the hospital, patients seemed happier and less anxious when petting the dog.

In 1976 she founded Therapy Dogs International once she had returned to New Jersey, including a certification process, for volunteer handlers to take their dogs into hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters and refuges.

Elaine Smith died in 2012 but the organisation she founded has developed and grown and now flourishes in the UK, USA, Canada and a host of other countries including, relatively recently, Kenya where the first Therapy Dog was a German Shepherd called Forest.

Earlier this year the *Eastleigh News* reported that a therapy dog, eight-year old golden retriever, Leo, and his handler were in contention for an

award at the *Crufts Friends for Life* competition in the *children's champion* category.

Leo supports patients at Southampton Children's Hospital. The award celebrates the unique relationship that people have with their dogs and the contested category demonstrates the support and impact that the dog has had on children.

Many people would like to be involved with their dogs in therapeutic programmes or practice. It is possible to establish whether a dog would be suitable. In England, ***Pets as Therapy***, and, in Scotland ***Therapet***, have their

own assessments to determine the suitability of a dog for particular activities.

The assessment includes review of training, obedience and temperament.

Many breeds of dog are suitable for therapy pets. The type of dog or its size is not usually a determining factor.

The dog's temperament and health are more important. If the dog is to be part of a visiting programme, special training, beyond basic obedience and placid temperament, may not be required.

The dog must have a calm and friendly manner and must not be too boisterous.

The considerable value of therapy dogs in various situations has been clearly demonstrated.

There were concerns about the use of dogs, particularly with the frail or vulnerable, which included hygiene, allergy,

safety, lack of consistent training and liability in the event that an aggravated dog were to become aggressive.

In fact the dogs meet high standards and normally undergo a behavioural and a health evaluation.

There are guidelines for hygiene (bathing and brushing dogs), ensuring that nails are trimmed and that vaccinations are up-to-date.

Consent is provided for the dogs to enter institutions or organisations and ensure that the premises owners, staff and patients have



responsibility for the animals with which they engage.

Adverse incidents are very rare although they are insured for their activities in case of a liability claim.

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