Therapy canines help sick children's revovery

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person-and-dog variety, but also teams featuring cats, rabbits, pigs and other animals.

At Albany Medical Center, doctors and nurses, figuring a bit of affection is good medicine, rely on volunteers like Conroy and dogs like Jane, a 2 1/2 year-old Portuguese water dog. Her coat is trimmed tight with a rounded bang over her button eyes that gives her a look of constant attentiveness. Aides and nurses are always saying "Awwww!" when she passes in the hall.

Jane likes to lick faces and will hop on hospital beds to get to one if invited. When a boy on a pediatric ward greets her wearing a surgical mask, Jane licks the mask. The boy puts on purple gloves to scratch Jane's tummy.

"Ohh! You don't want me to stop!" the boy says. "You're so cute!"

Jane is part of a troupe of about 14 dogs working the halls of the medical center. Among the others are Honee, Muddy, Darla, Rocky, Viva and Honor, a snow-colored, 130-pound Great Pyrenees who wears sunglasses.

They have their own bedside manner. Jane is bubbly. Seamus is laid back. Honee, a 9-pound coton de tulear, can be picked up. Honor cannot, and sometimes naps during group therapy.

Dogs are dispatched around the hospital based on requests from medical workers. Sometimes, three dogs at one time are visiting the young, the old, the recovering and the terminal. Dr. Richard Sills, director of Albany's Center for Childhood Cancer and Blood Disorders, notes that the dogs cheer up children and make hospitals more welcoming.

"The demand is always more than the supply," says Kelly Morrone, manager of volunteer services. "Never enough dogs."

Conroy carries a list of patients to visit, but will also walk through wards repeating, "Does anyone want a dog visit?"

A boy comes out to pet Jane, rolling along his intravenous unit. A mother beckons Jane to her teenage son's bed, where he is dozing. Jane hops on. He drapes an arm around her and shuts his eyes.

Jane is popular at the pediatric cancer center, where she has seen many of the children through hard times. Alexia, in remission now, used to get visits in the examining room and in her bed when things were touch and go.

"She would be out of it and she would be so weak and she would be talking about the dog coming by," says Alexia's mother, Pam Eubanks. "This was like the only thing when she was sick—and she was sick constantly when she got diagnosed— this was the only thing that raised her spirit."

Therapy dogs can be any breed, but dogs certified by Therapy Dogs International must meet strict standards for disposition, obedience and appearance. As part of her test, Jane had to walk past a cookie left in the open and navigate calmly through a jostling crowd.

Conroy is content being Jane's anonymous partner—or "the other end of the leash," as she calls it. Melting away pain, even for a moment, makes it worth it for her. She lights up when talking about patients in remission, like Alexia. Still, the work can be anguishing. Her faces clouds over talking about children who didn't get a happy ending and the obituaries she has read.

"There are days when I cry on the way home," she concedes.

Jane also seems attuned to patients' needs. She will jump up and lick the face of one patient who revels in it. Then she is reserved after a nurse whispers to Conroy that there's a newly diagnosed girl sitting quietly with her mom. She could use a visit, the nurse says.

Jane pads up to the teenager. The girl gives Jane an absent pat on the head. Conroy chats with mother and daughter about dogs. Jane leans in close to the girl, who strokes her back, gently working her fingers through the thick coat.

"For five minutes she was asking me about my dog and was talking about her dog," Conroy says, "and not thinking about all that chemotherapy."

On the Net:
Therapy Dogs International: http://www.tdi-dog.org/

Bigger everything for oversized Americans

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according to the CDC, is a whopping $117 billion a year, a figure that some health experts dispute, claiming the government numbers are based on faulty data. Not disputed, according to obesity specialists, is the amount Americans spend trying to get thinner—$33 billion a year.

U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona sounded a dire warning last month, telling university students in South Carolina "obesity is the terror within," and that unless people start getting thinner, "the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt."

Such pronouncements help fuel criticism that catering to bigger people really means throwing wide the door to death by overeating.

But for those who are overweight, who know full well how it feels to be sneered at, laughed at, pitied and scorned, having a simple tool such as a sponge on a stick, or a sturdy footstool that can bear up to 500 pounds, makes one feel a little more human. And a little less demonized.

Joan Borgos weighed 350 pounds for 28 years, until she had gastric bypass surgery and lost 200 pounds. She began putting out LargeDirectory.com because there was nothing available "that didn't look like a muu muu from Lane Bryant's," she said.

From her home in Massachusetts, she lists clothing catalogs, bridal shops (for gowns up to size 32), plus-size dating services, counseling services, seat belt extenders and lingerie. She recently added listings for teens, after desperate mothers told her they couldn't find stylish clothes for their overweight adolescents.

Even toddlers have joined the overweight ranks, with car seat manufacturers offering the "Husky," which is 10 pounds heavier and four inches wider than the standard size.

"There are all kinds of theories that abound about why people are getting heavier," said Borgos. "People are more sedentary, people eat more junk food and get less exercise. I don't know what it is.

"But it's a constant level of stress to live as an overweight person. You're always scoping out the environment, looking if you're going to be able to fit.

Kelly Bliss, a self-described "chubby chick" in suburban Philadelphia offers "plus-size fitness and lifestyle coaching."

Which means, she says, encouraging overweight clients to exercise as best they can, to eat healthily and to not focus on losing pounds.

"People cannot just stop being fat," she says. "It's prejudice when you say a fat person does not need things to make them comfortable," she says. "People crumble when you give them even more pressure on top of a life that's already not working."

To make caring for the overweight ill easier, and to make patients more comfortable, there also are specialized medical products for an ever-growing clientele.

Treating the obese is called bariatric care, from Greek root meaning weight. Providing it means hospitals are paying for wider beds, wider wheelchairs, wider doorways, longer needles and bigger CT scan machines. As well as larger gowns and extra-sized slippers.

And for the end of life's road, coffin makers have introduced new lines with higher-gauge steel and widths of up to 28 inches, from the standard 24.

In Indiana, the Batesville Casket Co. calls it "a little extra room for life's final journey."