



**pets = perfect
prescription for kids**

By Joe Montgomery

Dr. Sara Mark volunteers her time and expertise for pet-visitation program at Children's Hospital Colorado

It is said that laughter is the best medicine. Another good "medicine" could very well be the unconditional love provided through the human-animal bond.

A great example can be found at the Children's Hospital Colorado in Aurora (a Denver suburb), where pets are a prescription of choice. The Prescription Pet Program (RxPets) brings animals in to visit sick patients. The results of these interactions have been dramatic and touching.

One person who knows firsthand is Dr. Sara Mark, DVM 1983, who has helped develop a protocol for screening and training pets for entry into the program, as well as working with volunteers at the hospital who help handle the dogs that are used. Dr. Mark, who is originally from Hutchinson, Kan., also earned a bachelor's degree at K-State in 1977 with a dual major in life science and physical science and a minor in chemistry.

"There are so many amazing stories," Dr. Mark said. "I can go on about this place forever — about how much I enjoy it. I've been a volunteer coming into the hospital with my dog, worked on special events, and sat on the volunteer board. The more you know about this facility, the structure itself, you appreciate the commitment the hospital has to providing an optimal experience for the families."

Donna Matson, a volunteer at the hospital, echoed Dr. Mark's comments.

"It is hard to be a teenager in a children's hospital," Matson said. "This program has a dramatic impact. It can teach those who have not been loved that they can be loved. Our youth advisory council, which consists of teenage patients, just did a survey of other teens at the hospital. Did the kids want more macaroni and cheese or more dog visits? They wanted dog visits."

How the Pet Prescription Program began

The program was started in 1984 by Dr. Jan Facinelli, a veterinarian in Denver, and Mary Jo Cleveland, head nurse in oncology, and Director of Volunteers Fern Bechtel. Fern's son had been hospitalized and saw how much a visit from their dog meant to him. The three of them scheduled an additional 20 visits with the hospital then signed off on the program. The next step was to expand the program and provide service to more units in the hospital.

"We felt that if it were going to have real legitimacy, this program needed to have support of the local veterinary community," Dr. Mark said. The program incorporated help

from the Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society. "We needed an ongoing source of veterinarians to help screen dogs and to give input to help keep up the quality of the program, so this was a good partnership."

The program began with about 15-20 dogs and has grown to about 100 dogs. Any given day, there are at least two dogs visiting in the hospital.

There are other hospitals around the country that use animal interactions to help provide comfort and companionship to patients, but Dr. Mark said the program in Denver is unique due to its training protocol.

Formal protocol streamlines pet-screening process

"Initially the program was declared a model program of the Delta Society [for animal assisted activities/therapy]," Dr. Mark said. "People wanted to see how the program was structured, so it could be emulated, but we didn't have anything in writing. That's when I got involved in creating a protocol."



Dr. Sara Mark, far right, takes notes as her staff works with Marley, one of the pets in the Prescription Pet Program at The Children's Hospital Colorado.



The protocol lists a standard set of criteria that can be used in screening animals for acceptance into the program.

"Dogs have to be over 2 and less than 9 years old," Dr. Mark said. "We want them to be past the puppy stage, but at the upper end, we want them to have at least two years of participating. It's a hard thing to get them trained. We test for basic obedience skills: sound sensitivity, pain threshold, does the dog let you grab next to their face, pull on their hair, pull on their tails — all of those things that could potentially happen with children. What we do in the test is to go beyond anything they will experience on the floor in the hospital, but we have to be sure. We have to be absolutely sure."

Kathleen McBride, director of volunteers at Children's Colorado, said, "There's such a variety of dogs. We have had boxers, retrievers, Great Pyrenees, Great Danes — it's really novel to see and experience it. I got to watch Sara as she was checking a dog to see if it would qualify for the program. It's just amazing to see what the dog has to do to prove himself."

In addition, the owners are screened for participation.

"We actually do a phone interview asking some probing questions," Dr. Mark said. "We want them to tell us about why they're interested in this program. If someone says, 'I have this really special dog and people need to see it,' then, no, that's the wrong answer."

Program breeds success

Melissa Vizcarra, media relations coordinator for Children's Colorado, said, "Even with all of those strict guidelines, it's a very competitive program. There's a waiting list."

Matson added, "Not a day goes by that we don't get a call from a prospective volunteer."

Dr. Mark devotes countless volunteer hours with Children's Colorado and with the pets, which she manages on top of having her own veterinary practice, Southwest Veterinary Hospital in Littleton. Early on, she had brought her own dog to do visits at the hospital (see sidebar), but found more than she had expected.

"After I had a chance to be in the hospital — after being exposed to the people in the volunteer department — it was like, 'Okay, I don't really care if my dog can make it or not in the program, I just want to be a part of this,'" Dr. Mark said. "Everyone is accomplishing something positive. Even a lot of people whose dogs don't make it, still choose to volunteer for the hospital because they've seen the system and seen the atmosphere. They want to be a part of it."

Matson said, "This is my sixth year volunteering. It's too bad I didn't start volunteering sooner — it's such an environment. It's hard to



Top: Dr. Sara Mark talks about her volunteer efforts at Children's Hospital Colorado in Aurora. Middle: One of the pets with a patient (courtesy Children's Colorado). Bottom: Marley, a Havanese, trains at Dr. Mark's clinic for participation in the Prescription Pet Program.

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describe when you're here, and Dr. Mark is an intricate part of our operation. From her, it's like the domino effect — it just goes and goes and goes."

McBride said, "These two (Matson and Dr. Mark) have something in common. They were both volunteers of the year in separate years. I just think the world of them and what they do. The volunteers and our staff all know Dr. Mark, so when she was selected at the ceremony, instead of applause, everybody barked."

CVM selects Dr. Mark as 2012 Alumni Fellow

Because of the respect and admiration Dr. Mark has earned from her colleagues and

peers, she has been named as the upcoming 2012 Alumni Fellow for the College of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Mark will be invited to the K-State campus in February where she will participate in several college activities as well as in the formal recognition of Alumni Fellows for the other academic colleges at K-State. 



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