

Excerpts from article from The Commonwealth Times, Dog Therapy Program Prescribed to Patients, April 21, 2013

<http://www.commonwealthtimes.org/2013/04/21/dog-therapy-program-prescribed-to-patients/>

VCU's Center for Human-Animal Interaction (CHAI) provides a therapy dog program called Dogs on Call. Volunteers and their dogs roam the hospital halls visiting patients that need to see a friendly face.

CHAI was founded in 2001 in VCU's School of Medicine with a mission of improved human health and wellbeing through animal interaction. Dogs on Call, the dog therapy program, is offered through the hospital's clinical services.

For a dog to become certified for Dogs on Call, it has to pass certain temperament and obedience tests. Within 24 hours of each visit, the dog has to be bathed and groomed to avoid bringing in unwanted bacteria to the hospital.

Dogs and their owners can volunteer for the program to help patients around the VCU Medical Center. "It's actually a very realistic thing and it helps a lot of people," said rising fourth-year VCU medical student Jessica Hupe.

Hupe has been volunteering with her golden retriever, Mona, for the past several years while in school to become a doctor with a specialty in physical medicine and rehabilitation. She plans to continue volunteering throughout the remainder of medical school and come graduation and hopes to work in a hospital where she can be involved in a similar program.

"I think it really helps (patients) a lot to have something or someone there that doesn't talk to them and try to explain what's going on with their illness or how they should be feeling, but just kind of chills out with them and understands without words. I think it's really important for their healing," Hupe said.

Patient visits with dogs like Mona, however, do more than just cheer people up. In addition to facilitating Dogs on Call through VCU, CHAI conducts research about the physical and mental effects visits with a therapy dog can have on a person.

Hupe said that as a student, participating in the program is just as therapeutic for her as it is for patients.

"I think it's mentally changed my perspective on everything," she said. "I think it's made me a more well-rounded person to have other things to focus on outside of being a medical student. ... At home, Mona is as good therapy to me as she is to patients when I take her into the hospital. I'm a busy person, but definitely a happy person."

