

Licking Loneliness



My Pet Therapy Experiences — *Judy Thrift*

Visiting the hospital can be sad or happy. Visits to the oncology floor brings back many stories. I've had one patient break down in tears and wanted to give me her dog. She was having surgery and was positive she wasn't going to make it. The pet therapy coordinator at the hospital is a wonderful person. I emailed her and she arranged to have a family member bring the patient's dog in to visit her. This patient got well and went back home to her dog.

Many patients on the oncology floor are sad because they're losing independence due to illness. Sometimes, they're just lonely. Many times Lukas will fall asleep on the floor as I sit and listen to the patients tell me their life story. Some patients have incurable cancer and a short time to live. Other patients are finishing with chemo treatments and their doctors believe they've gotten rid of the cancer — a time for rejoicing.

Patients enjoy petting the dogs and sometimes snuggling. I've had patients pet the dogs the entire time I'm in the room. They look as if they're trying to rub the fur off the dog! The repetitive action of stroking a dog is very soothing to them. If a non-surgical patient asks for the therapy dog to get on the bed, I always put a bath blanket down. Both Lukas and Ulee have very gingerly gotten up on the bed and just snuggled right in. The patients love it! I've had patients tell me many times it made their day to have the dog visit. There have been times when a doctor, resident and even nurses passing in the hallway have stopped to chat saying the quick visit with the dog brightened their day.

While giving Lukas the once over with the slicker and getting his ID badge hooked to his collar in the hospital lobby, a couple came over and asked if they could spend some time with us. They were therapy dog owners from out-of-state who were visiting a dying family member. They'd been in Pennsylvania for several weeks and their dog was home and they missed him very much. Lukas gave nuzzles and kisses to everyone and the couple said they felt so much better with our therapy dog fix.

The heart breaking stories ... One patient had been a second grade teacher, a foster care provider for more than fifty special need kids, adopted several special need kids, and provided respite care for special kids. She did everything right when it came to personal

health care including going to her doctor for annual checkups. Her husband had passed and shortly afterwards she found out she had three different kinds of cancer. Despite this news, she had the best attitude EVER. I'm truly blessed to be able to keep her company.

The visits to the hospital are usually happy on the antepartum floor where expectant moms are on strict bed rest in order to keep the babies from coming too early. I spend a lot of time here talking and listening to these anxious moms. Some have families that live hours away and aren't able to visit every day. With limited activity, the TV gets old really quickly. The department does their best to break up the time with luncheons, holiday baked goods, and special activities. Some moms are here from a few days to a few weeks. The longest time a mom stayed was 3-4 months. Even with visiting the hospital once every three to four weeks, you feel like some of them are family. The down side is that you seldom get to see the actual babies after they're delivered.

One family had tried and tried to get pregnant and had given up. They'd been married 10 years. They were convinced they'd only be an aunt and uncle. Well, surprise, surprise! With flu like symptoms, they found they were pregnant with twins ... a boy and a girl! It's very unusual that newborns are on this floor but I was excited to get to see the twins. Sadly, one of the twins did not survive but this family still wanted to have Lukas visit them. Mom had a tiny bundle of pink cradled in her arms as we walked into the room. Lukas walked slowly up to mom who held the baby out for him to sniff. Lukas snuffled the newborn and then sat to petted. It brought tears to my eyes.

One expectant mom we visited on several occasions was transferred to labor before we were able to see her. Just as we were waiting by the elevator to leave, a floor nurse was pushing a gurney down the hallway. She said to us, This is the patient you were supposed to see earlier." The new mom wanted to say "hello" to Lukas who walked over to her as she put her hand through the railing and gave her a kiss as she patted him. Behind the new mom's gurney was another nurse with an isolette with three little bundles (triplets) in it. And, following close behind were happy grandparents, aunts and uncles.

