

Sit, Stay, Place: Optimizing a Healing Environment for Hospitalized Patients through Visits with Therapy Dogs

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The need to create an optimal healing space within the boundaries of the hospital has fostered encouraging discussions and actions surrounding the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental needs of patients as persons. In recognizing that hospitals are an uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and industrial space, many institutions have made significant efforts to remedy this strange environment through adding artwork to rooms or painting walls in calming colors among other solutions. However, there is another aspect of a healing environment that may significantly influence human flourishing for hospitalized patients. Through inviting therapy dogs into the hospital to visit with patients, a profound and organic growth can happen for the patient on their journey of healing.

This presentation will address the need for hospitals and healthcare professionals to challenge their human-centered approach of healing spaces to better support patients who would benefit from therapy dog visits. Research shows that patients who interact with therapy dogs report feeling happier, confident, empowered to participate more fully in decision-making, and peaceful. Patients also speak to how the therapy dogs are a connection to nature and a reminder of home. Additionally, therapy dogs are a non-judgmental, non-demanding presence in the hospital that meets the patient as a person, evoking self-realization and a return to wholeness. These findings are aspects that are central to promoting a healing space. The medical humanities call upon us to understand and advocate for the connections we have to other species, of coexisting with other beings, and the unique healing those relationships can promote.

**A longer version of this abstract was previously accepted for the CHCI Health and Medical Humanities Conference in Odense, Denmark for June 25, 2020 – June 27, 2020. The conference has since been cancelled and pending a possible reschedule due to the Covid19 pandemic.