

## Therapy dogs play many roles

By Jane Miller

The therapy in therapy dog can be defined as the feelings of joy that come from a friendly dog, say many therapy-dog owners. You can often identify a certified therapy dog by a yellow collar tag that says "I am a therapy dog," or a red bandana.

You'll see them in public places that include hospitals, hospices, schools and libraries. They visit nursing and assisted living homes, schools and libraries. Therapy dogs and their handlers have calmed people after traumatic events, and helped children learn how to read through "Tail Waggin' Tutor" times.

The program at Allegheny General Hospital began two years ago, when Mary Ann Hirt, a nurse manager who has four rescue dogs that are all certified therapy dogs, made a visit to the hospital.

"I was visiting with my Great Dane, and a man was crying," Hirt says. "I didn't know what to say, but my dog put his paw on his shoulder and began licking his head. The man laughed, then everyone else laughed, and it was just the right thing for the moment."

Hirt began the program by following guidelines established by Therapy Dog International, as well as the hospital's own policies. Therapy Dog International began in 1976 as a governing organization to test dogs for temperament and suitability, and provides insurance for possible injuries. Last year, there were 21,000 members.

"With TDI, your dog is the member and you are the associate," Hirt says. Her dogs were trained and certified through a program at Western Pennsylvania Humane Society. Many shelters and kennel clubs have classes and programs. For instance, the Animal Friends' Pet-Assisted Therapy program has 37 dogs and two rabbits that make regular visits to 50 to 60 facilities, says Ann Cadman, Animal Friends' Health & Wellness coordinator.

In an evaluation, a dog is tested on basic obedience commands of "sit," "down" and "stay," and must be able to accept a friendly stranger and be petted. The dog needs to be calm around wheelchairs, walkers or active children -- and not be distracted by loud noises.

Perhaps one of the most important places where therapy dogs are welcome is a hospice, says **Dr. Susan Hunt, the Medical Director of UPMC's Palliative Care and Family Hospice.** She started the hospice therapy-dog program three years ago. **Now, Ivan, a golden retriever, is a live-in therapy dog.**

"Dogs don't ask for anything. We have had patients respond to the dog when they wouldn't respond otherwise," Hunt says. "Patients are often isolated because they are ill."

The dogs are loved -- and needed -- by the nursing staff, too, Hunt says.

"I've seen floors of nurses say, 'Oh, we need a visit from Wheatie, Toby or Duke today.' And, of course, dogs are wonderful listeners and counselors," she says. "If you love animals, just touching a dog is a connection with something that is living."