

# A new pet therapy



Cooper visits with staff from Melrose-Wakefield Hospital's Medical 3 floor after visiting with patients.

# py program

## at Melrose-Wakefield Hospital

Man's best friend can also be his best medicine. At Hallmark Health System's Melrose-Wakefield Hospital (MWH) patients recently began getting weekly visits from Cooper, a 2-year-old terrier mix, through the hospital's new pet therapy program. This type of care is proven to improve patient outcomes by reducing anxiety and stress levels, providing patients with a distraction from their illness and making the hospital experience more "home-like."

The hospital works with the Pets and People Foundation, a non-profit organization founded in 1985 that brings pet-assisted therapy to patients in hospitals, nursing homes and halfway houses in eastern Massachusetts. During his weekly visits to MWH, Cooper walks the halls on different medical floors to see patients, their families and staff. He's usually at the hospital for an hour and is able to see about five patients during that time. If the patient wants, Cooper will get up on the bed with them so they can pet him and get a closer look. Staff puts a sheet down on the patients' beds to keep it free of dog hair. Patients who don't want Cooper on their bed, pet him and give him treats from a chair.

Jodi Dwyer, LICSW, medical social worker at MWH, developed the pet therapy program after hearing about the success of similar programs at other hospitals. The program has been up and running for several months now and is going very well.

"The program is a morale booster for patients, their families and staff," said Dwyer. "The patients light up when Cooper comes into their room. His visit gives them a nice break from what is ailing them."

Patients are asked to fill out a survey to let the hospital know what they thought of their visit with Cooper and thus far the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Karen Costigan, BSN, RN, NE-BC, patient care director for Medical 5, couldn't be happier with the program. She said Cooper has a calming and uplifting effect on patients during their hospital stay.

*"The patients light up when Cooper comes into their room."*

"You can't help but have a smile on your face when you see him," Costigan said. "We try to make patients' stay with us as positive as possible and attend to their physical needs as well as their emotional needs. This program is one way we are able to do that."

Annette Bush, of Wilmington, is Cooper's owner and accompanies him on his visits to MWH. She said volunteering is something she always wanted to do so when she adopted Cooper she decided to volunteer in a hospital. Bush contacted the Pets and People Foundation, shadowed an experienced pet therapy volunteer, brought Cooper in for a health and behavioral screening and began volunteering from there.

Bush, a teacher at Wilmington Middle School, enjoys her weekly visits to the hospital, adding it's great to see the patients' reactions to Cooper and see how happy he makes them. "A lot of times the patients have said our visit made their day," she said. "Everyone we have visited with really enjoys Cooper."

**For more information about the program, call (781) 979-3426.**