



Chapter from

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The Paws that Heal

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Pets are an integral part of many families and I, like many others, grew up with dogs, cats, rabbits and even white mice, which were much appreciated by my siblings but not my mother. As pet owners our animals help us exercise, meet new friends and relax at home – lowering blood pressure and relieving anxieties. They are our friends and confidantes, always happy to see us. If we are sick, disabled, old, lonely we need contact with other kinds of animals as well as humans.

There are a number of voluntary groups who work in this field using their own pets, bringing them into hospitals, care homes, disability centres and even schools, where children with reading problems can read stories to a relaxed animal, forgetting the adult sitting close by.

Pets as Therapy is the largest organisation of its kind in the UK. It is a registered charity, begun in 1983, and has about five thousand dogs and around a hundred cats making regular therapeutic visits.

Therapy Dogs Nationwide, also a registered UK charity, only began in 2016 and is managed by volunteers. There are many therapy groups using animals both in the UK and in other countries. More information is available on the Internet.

I first read about Pets as Therapy in a magazine article many years ago and thought it was a great idea. However I taught in a primary school and lived in a community and dog owning was not possible. So the idea went on the back burner.

In 2007 I finally re-homed a dog from the RSPCA. Her name was Muffin. After six months I applied for an assessment for her as a therapy pet. During those six months I discovered that I owned a lively, lovable dog but one who had no idea of recall or walking on a lead. She chased bikes and hunted rabbits! In spite of this I decided to give her a chance with the assessment. The day finally came; the venue, a car park near a local wildlife park! The assessor explained she would be watching Muffin's reactions to every movement around us as I walked her on the lead, allowing her to be stroked, ears, tail and feet played with, treats offered and finally a metal tray dropped behind us. I prayed that there were no squirrels, rabbits or bikes in the area to make matters worse. We were about an hour. Muffin was fantastic. She walked, sat, played and totally ignored the noises around her.

We became therapy visitors, volunteering to go to a local care home. Muffin had a yellow jacket and collar with a photo ID. When she wore them she was no longer the busy hunter but a quiet, calm, gentle dog.

The home had five units. Three were residential, one was for nursing and the third was a secure dementia unit. We visited each of them every week, spending time with both residents and staff. Not everyone approved of a dog but slowly over the weeks Monday became 'pat a dog day'! Not exactly a posh title but appropriate. I would take Muffin into each lounge and she would jump on the stool and allow herself to be hugged, patted and sometimes walked in the grounds on a double lead. Sometimes the local church choir would arrive and the lounge would empty, however Muffin took to joining in the singing so after that there was always a following – maybe not for the right reason!

Muffin had the knack of finding the people who were unhappy or having a bad day. Sometimes members of staff called me in to see certain residents. One could be quite violent and would hit out, throwing objects at both staff and residents. Muffin would walk into the room, snuggling up with head and front paws resting gently on her knees. Within minutes the woman would be calm and hugging Muffin. Another, whose name was Jo, and who was suffering from depression, would not get out of bed. Muffin would stand at her door and bark to get her attention then would walk to the lounge and wait. Sure enough, before we left the building Jo would be helped into the lounge by a carer and Muffin would make a fuss of her.

There is a waiting list for Therapy Pets and I was asked if I would take Muffin to another home to see how the residents there would react. We visited each area and a few wanted to talk and stroke Muffin. On the way out one of the carers called me and said there was a woman in the room with dementia; she had not spoken or responded to anything for at least the last year, however they did know that she used to own a dog. I went in the room and there were several carers around saying to the woman, "Look here's a dog", and "give me your hand and stroke the dog" but there was no response, just an emptiness in her eyes. Muffin took things in hand. She jumped on the empty chair next to the woman and put a paw on her arm. Then she climbed onto the arm of the chair and gave her a gentle lick to her cheek. The woman's eyes came to life, her hands stretched out and pulled Muffin's ears saying, "dog a dog". Muffin stayed still whilst she had her tail, ears and feet pulled, her fur ruffled and even her eyes poked. Then the woman's eyes again went empty. Muffin gently licked her face climbed off the chair and walked away. There were tears in that room. Just for a few minutes something akin to a miracle had happened.

Most days were not exceptional they were just ordinary visits to people who loved Muffin and were loved by her. We continued visiting the same care home for six years, meeting new residents and saying goodbye to others. Muffin greeted and amused them all, and because of her the home allowed the families to bring in pets to help with recovery and to make it more homely. Muffin would greet any other animal in the lounge before visiting her friends.

Muffin's visits ended when she was diagnosed with lymphoma three years ago and we retired from official therapy work because of treatment and possible infections both to Muffin and to the elderly residents.

We both miss our Monday visits. Muffin still engages in her favourite pastimes of hunting and cycle chasing, and on her walks she is known and greeted by everyone, her zest for life and mischief putting a smile on the saddest face.

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Relevant Websites

petsastherapy.org

therapydogsnationwide.org