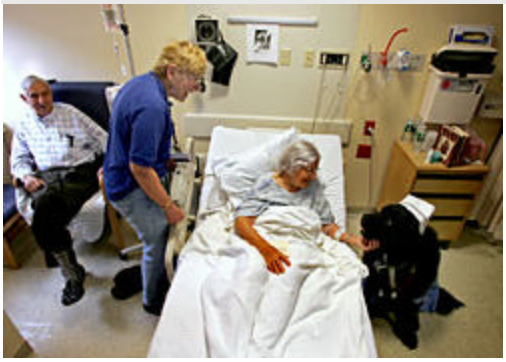
Picture this: Pet therapy



THOMAS E. FRANKLIN / THE RECORD

Kaili, a Newfoundland dog, and her handler Joyce Ochs visit with patient Angela Musso and her husband Victor.

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By THOMAS E. FRANKLIN
PHOTOGRAPHER AND WRITER

A hospital stay can be a painful and lonely experience, rife with discomfort, worry and uncertainty. Some hospitals are hoping to ease this anxiety by allowing specially trained dogs and handlers to visit with patients. Pet therapy allows patients to touch, pet and socialize with the animals in a safe and non-threatening manner. The mere presence of an animal can bring joy to the ailing and make their pain seem to disappear -- if only for a moment.

The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood has embraced this activity. Twenty-nine dogs visit the hospital daily. "It provides a positive distraction for the patients," says Phyllis Ardis, Valley's volunteer resources coordinator. "It redirects some of the sadness and loneliness. It's a source of laughter and pleasure. It gets them involved in a conversation."

One of these dogs is a massive 135-pound Newfoundland named Kaili, who lumbers about the halls with a well-behaved presence that demands attention and adoration. This bear-like Newfie has star quality; she and her owner Joyce Ochs seem to brighten every face they meet. Doctors of medicine suddenly behave like 10-year-olds. Nurses, who tirelessly administer to the sick and dying, suddenly drop everything to wander over and pet and ogle the big Newf.

"I love seeing the looks on people's faces, especially people who never have any visitors," says Ochs, who makes the rounds at Valley on Monday and Thursday evenings.

Pet therapy has been around for decades. Ardis says dogs have visited with Valley patients since 2003. But Ochs adds her own personal touch. She dresses Kaili in a different themed outfit each week. This past week, the gentle giant was dressed as a nurse -- scrubs, an old-fashioned nurse's cap and a stethoscope -- all in celebration of national Nurses Week.

"The employees [benefit], too," Ochs says. "What they deal with every day, the suffering and death. The nurses of Valley are fantastic. The job is so stressful."

One of the patients they visited was 88-year-old Angela Musso, who had a cairn terrier waiting at home.

"The look on her face," Ochs recalls later. "She lit up. This elderly lady, she looked like she was in a lot of discomfort. She forgot everything with Kaili. She thought about her dog at home. ... She had her dog with her, just for those moments.

"You have to smile. A dog is love. Unconditionally."