

Redeeming the Relationship ...

by Faith Richardson, Assistant Professor of Nursing, TWU, April, 2007

Nursing and Medical schools throughout the years have utilized animals in their curriculum for the benefit of their students, but most often to the detriment of the animals themselves (ie. experimentation and vivisection). Ironically, animal assisted therapy and pet visitation have also traditionally been associated with nursing and medicine. This ambivalence: valuing animals as positive contributors to human health and learning, yet devaluing animals in the laboratory context is readily demonstrable through a quick survey of the history of health education.

Trinity Western University's Nursing department is seeking to redeem the relationship between health education and animals through a unique program bringing dogs and nursing students together in the learning laboratory. Janna, a two year old Dalmatian, has a history of neglect and illness as a puppy and was 'adopted' by Faith Richardson, Assistant Professor of Nursing at Trinity Western University, a year ago. Janna comes to the University routinely with Faith and is being socialized to become a therapy dog. The nursing students are very much a part of Janna's learning to be a great therapy dog—and she has become very much a part of their learning as well.



Janna is present in Faith's lecture classes and in many of her practice laboratory classes as well. Janna enters the classroom eager to 'visit' with the students and happily makes her rounds saying 'hi!' Students respond positively to the natural clowning of the Dalmatian—and stay awake in lecture—especially after one student nodded off and was woken up with great concern by Janna! In the nursing practice lab, Janna is utilized as a living teaching tool. For example, nursing students typically find it challenging to master the use of a stethoscope and listen to heart sounds on actual patients. With Janna, they can relax, take their time and learn to distinguish the normal heart sounds—she does not judge their skill, or worry about their findings. Furthermore, Janna's heart rate (normal for her) is typically much higher than a healthy human; the ability for a student to detect this difference and to sort out the normal heart sounds at this higher rate, stands them in good stead when faced with anxious human patients with tachycardia (abnormally high heart rate). As well, Janna is the perfect 'model' for Faith to demonstrate safe, effective, yet gentle motor muscular assessment. Faith has noted that the difference in the dog versus human anatomy is a positive: students focus less on trying to duplicate skills by rote, and more on learning to think through the principles, and apply clinical reasoning to the practice of assessment.



Last week, the nursing students were able to assess another canine with two common problems in both animals and humans: heart murmur and eye cataracts. Tasha, a black Cockapoo, owned by one of the nursing students came in as a visiting 'scholar' of sorts to allow students to gain this assessment experience in the nursing practice laboratory. Annelise Still, just completing her second year of nursing at TWU, had a revelation of her own when she put her stethoscope on Tasha at home. "Suddenly I knew what a murmur sounded like—for real," Annelise explains. "I knew that listening to Tasha's chest would help other nursing students as well."

The reward of having a relationship with an animal on human health is undisputed in the health literature. How wonderful to be able to redeem the relationship of health education with animals—specifically to be able to give a good dog a great job helping nursing students learn and laugh!