

Pets are good for the elderly *animal respon*



Frances Pilger, 69, takes pride in the responsibility of feeding her daughter's dog, Honey, a 6-month-old Pomeranian. According to nursing home directors, old people need this type of responsibility to maintain autonomy and self respect.

Photo by Brian Tate

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By Susan Hopkins

Battalion Staff

Companion animals may be the only source of affection and responsibility left to some old people. However, as their medical needs increase and they have to enter nursing homes, they are also required to give up their pets.

Texas law forbids animals to reside in nursing homes for obvious health and safety reasons. But advocates of pet therapy — who strongly believe that pets are good for people, especially the elderly — are working to change, or at least re-interpret this law.

Clarice Seufert, in "Pets in a Nursing Home Environment," says that many oldsters experience loss of self esteem and autonomy, as well as loss of some basic freedoms and responsibilities, during their transition from community life to institutional environments.

Studies have shown that pets could help ease this transition, and, in fact, give elderly people a will to live as the animals become therapeutic social catalysts.

As a result, a Minnesota law now allows companion animals on the premises of nursing homes, subject to certain rules as to care, type and maintenance of the pets.

Dr. Bill McCulloch, professor of veterinary public health at Texas A&M University, is working with both Texas officials and Bryan-College Station nursing and retirement home administrators to establish a similar program here that would allow pets in such public institutions.

Presently, the state law regarding animals in nursing homes is vague, and must be interpreted by health department surveyors.

An inspector of nursing homes for Region 6 (which includes Brazos County) says that interpretation based on past experiences now allows animals to stay on the grounds of nursing homes, although they may not enter the buildings.

Several nursing and retirement home activity directors have responded favorably to the idea of having pets available to elderly residents, even if they must be kept outside.

Debbie Sulik, of Sherwood Health Care Facility in Bryan, says that 80 percent of the residents there are from farming backgrounds that included animals. She says animals outside the nursing home — even chickens, hogs and cows — could create a sense of reality for many patients there.

And Bonnie Knowles, activity director at Leisure Lodge Nursing Home, said, "One woman (at Leisure Lodge) cleans her room at least 12 times a day because there is nothing else for her to do. She used to milk cows and feed the chickens every day on her farm. She needs that same kind of responsibility here."

Sulik says that although she does not believe pets should take the place of people for companionship, she has known elderly residents who refuse to leave their rooms to socialize. Animals may be an incentive to draw them out, she says.

The only animals that any Bryan-College Station nursing or retirement home residents see are fish and lizards that are enclosed in containers set in the main rooms of homes.

"These people need touching," Sulik says. "They need the added aspect of giving and receiving unconditional love; and just watching a terrarium does not seem to satisfy this."

She says her main concern about having animals at the facility is that they would bite or harm the residents, who in turn may hold Sherwood liable.

"If Texas allows animals, we also need a law to say that it's the resident's pet and that the home is not liable," she says.

Spare land in back of Sherwood, and most other local nursing homes as well, would lend itself to kennels, pens or stalls for a variety of animals. If such a situation could be arranged, Sulik says, she would stress that the responsibility for feeding and general upkeep of the animals should be left up to



Local researchers are discussing plans for like Frances Pilger, 69, (above) to "visit" them, if required to enter a nursing home