**Evo Terra (Host):** In-hospital therapy for patients is going to the dogs, and that's a good thing, as you'll soon find out.

This is Memorial Health Radio with Memorial Health System Ohio. I'm your host, Evo Terra. And today, I'm joined by Erin Miller, Pet Therapy Coordinator, to talk about the impact therapy dogs have on patients while they're in the hospital. Erin, thanks for joining me.

**Erin Miller:** Hi. Thank you for having me.

**Host:** Now, I know a hospital is supposed to be this super clean, sterile environment, and you are bringing dogs into the hospital, not only to the hospital, but directly into patient rooms.

**Erin Miller:** Correct, correct. Yes. We pride ourselves on taking a lot of precautions to prepare for each visit. Before each visit, the dogs at home get a bath and a nice brush before they visit, and then in between visits into patient's rooms. They also get wiped down with baby wipes and cleaned real well and ready for our next visit.

**Host:** So, let's get to the heart of this matter. Why are you doing this? What are the benefits of pet therapy in the hospital?

**Erin Miller:** Great question. So, there's been lots of studies that have proven dogs visiting patients actually decrease heart rates. They help patient engagement. So, patients who have had strokes or undergoing physical therapy that might be a little down might not want to be so cooperative with their clinical staff, sometimes we will get called in because it's really hard for the patients to be upset or depressed when the dogs are there. So, they utilize the dogs to get the patients up and walking, petting, things of that nature.

**Host:** Yeah. We are certainly motivated to actually be a happier person and go do things because, "Ooh, look at that little face," right? I mean, you just have to. So, where do you get the dogs from?

**Erin Miller:** So, we have four therapy dogs that currently visit the hospital. We have Gidget. She's a 14-1/2-year-old goldendoodle. She was purchased from a breeder. She's my oldest friend. We have Vinny, he is a nine-year-old terrier mix. He was adopted, he came from our local humane society. And then, we have Tucker, he's a three-year-old Irish Wolfhound, also came from a breeder. And then, his half-brother Whelan, he's in training, he is also an Irish wolfhound. He's eight months old.

**Host:** So, some big dogs and the terriers on the smaller side of things.

**Erin Miller:** Correct. Some of each size.

**Host:** Yeah. That's good because you never know what the right one to do this. Now, you have dogs, but I'm just curious, can people do pet therapy with other animals? Like are there therapy cats, therapy, I don't know, bearded dragons?

**Erin Miller:** So, yes, different organizations do certify different animals, not at Memorial Health system as of yet. But I have seen therapy horses, therapy cats, thing along that nature. It's just picking the right therapy organization to fit what your expectations are.

**Host:** I can't imagine very many hospital systems being excited about having a horse led up to someone's room. There might be a different level of therapy there. Oh, this is really fun stuff. So, talk to me about the medical benefits of this. I mean, you talked about some of those before on the benefits side. But I'm thinking, is a pet therapy something that gets prescribed by a physician? And I guess also, does insurance cover this? How does this work?

**Erin Miller:** Right. So right now, the physicians at our hospital can put in an order for us to visit their patients. So if they go into a room and discover a patient's very depressed, maybe a little combative, things of that nature, they'll put a request in through our system, and then we will go in and visit the patient. A lot of times though, we just make ourselves readily available at the hospital, so the clinical staff will see us walking in the halls and kind of get us pulled in that way. Prior to COVID, we spend almost all of our time visiting patients. And then when COVID hit, we obviously were not allowed to continue visitation. And then, we started noticing influx of different departments actually calling us in for their staff to help decompress staff as well. So, it's just a really well rounded program. We've helped decompress our staff and then we also help with the clinical side of things as well.

**Host:** Yeah. Thinking through pandemic and COVID things, I imagine those wolfhounds walking around with masks on was an interesting sight.

**Erin Miller:** Right. They no longer walk around with masks on, but we do like to dress the dogs up and make them fun, because we do have some larger dogs as we talked about earlier. And so, we like to dress them up and make them welcoming for some people who might be otherwise a little surprised to see giant dogs in our hospital.

**Host:** Yeah. That sounds like a really fun thing and also a beneficial thing for patients that are there and also, as you're mentioning for staff and others, I mean, it's again, it's a dog. "Look at that cute face." How could you not? Erin, is there anything else we need to know?

**Erin Miller:** One big question that we always get asked are the difference between therapy dogs and service dogs, they're very much different. The therapy dogs are just like everyone else's pets, but they are very well trained. They are insured. They have gone through special training to be well-rounded. They need to be outgoing. They need to want to approach people, strangers, let them pet, things of that nature. We are not allowed in restaurants or airplanes or anything like that.

Service dogs, on the other hand, need to be for one person, so they alert for PTSD, they alert for seizures, they alert for things like that. And so, they need to ignore all outside distractions and they are actually protected, there's laws protecting them, and they are treated just like a person. So, they're allowed in restaurants, they're allowed on the planes, places where dogs are normally not allowed. The reason that the four dogs that I mentioned earlier are allowed in the hospital because they are actually employees basically of the hospital. So, that's been really fun to come about though.

**Host:** Yeah. Well it's been a fascinating conversation, Erin. Thank you for all of the information.

**Erin Miller:** Thank you so much for having us.

**Host:** Once again, that was Pet Therapy coordinator, Erin Miller. And that wraps up this episode of Memorial Health Radio with Memorial Health System. Please visit our website at mhsystem.org for more information and to get connected with one of our providers. Please remember to subscribe, rate, and review this podcast and all the other Memorial Health System podcasts. I'm Evo Terra. Stay well.