

# HEALTH CORNER



## The Doctor Game Pet Therapy: Unconditionally Good for You?

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Harry Truman, when elected President of the U.S., was well aware of the potential hazards of his job. He famously remarked, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog." Truman was a good judge of character and knew a dog would always provide him with unconditional loyalty, regardless of cutthroat politics in Washington. But if dogs are suitable companions for Presidents, are they also good for the rest of us?

A recent report from the Mayo Clinic asks, "Is medicine going to the dogs?" The answer is "Yes, but in a good way." Hospitals and doctors are increasingly aware that dogs bring joy and rehabilitation to patients with a variety of health problems. There are more than a dozen registered therapy dogs and handlers at the Mayo Clinic's Caring Canines program. They make regular visits to some patients as part of their medical therapy and offer special visits on request to others.

Aging, with the loss of loved family and friends, can be depressing and lonely. The onset of illness and impersonal hospital settings can make days of looking at four walls seem like an eternity. A visit from a dog can bring sunshine into a patient's life and do more good than the pharmaceutical drugs being prescribed by medical staff.

Animal assisted therapy makes sense in many circumstances – for instance, with the elderly in long-term care facilities, patients suffering from dementia, or those receiving cancer treatment or fighting anxiety. In fact, few patients say no to a dog wagging its tail at their hospital door.

But some patients and their families may wonder whether there are health risks when dogs enter a hospital room. The Mayo Clinic and other hospitals using pet therapy insist on strict regulations ensuring dogs are clean and healthy.

But patients must also realize they too must follow sound hygiene, whether in hospital or on other occasions. I recall one occasion of concern when at a friend's home for dinner. He patted his dog, ran his hands down the dog's tail and then picked up ice cubes for my drink. And Fido may have pooped, just before my rum and coke!

Years ago I wrote about what I considered another sound way to help older patients at Sunnybrook Veterans Centre in Toronto. At that time a pub allowed veterans one alcoholic drink at noon and another before dinner. I spent several hours witnessing how effective it was in the treatment of depression and loneliness for long-term patients.

A friendly server was part of the therapy. I watched one welcome a veteran in a wheelchair who had lost both legs saying, "Charlie do you want your usual drink?" I'm confident the moderate consumption of alcohol offered healthy benefits. But another advantage was the camaraderie and alternative to a stark hospital room for a period of time.

I also remember the shock from surgical nurses when I allowed my post-operative patients an alcoholic drink on their third recuperative day. It reassured them that they were on the way to recovery. If I'd had access to therapy dogs, I would have encouraged their participation in the recovery process.

I've advocated that patient-focused pubs in hospitals would do more good than most of the medicines prescribed, particularly for long-term patients. A policy that supports a bedside drink is a start, but there is no comparison to the social benefits of a cozy pub.

The same is true of Fido or any other well-trained animal. Pet therapy offers a pleasant distraction and an elevation of happiness that can be remarkably healing. I'm partial to dogs. A dog offers unconditional love, which is precisely what so many patients need.

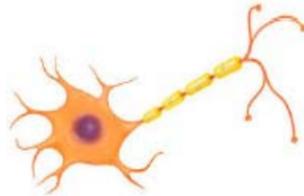
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## Direct Answers

from Wayne & Tamara

### A Broken Promise

I do not know where to begin. My mother-in-law is evil. I know that is mean, but it is appropriate. Let's get started...

While I was pregnant, we were going to name our daughter after his mother, but a month before my due date we came across another name. My husband told his mother, and she accused him of changing it to my mother's name, which wasn't true.

Two weeks later Christmas came, and she sent a gift up for my husband and nothing for me. When my husband inquired, she said she "forgot" about me. How convenient.

A year later was my daughter's first Christmas. There are two uncles in my husband's family, and to put it lightly, those men should not be around children. My mother-in-law knows this. My husband told her beforehand we would leave if they were there. Sure enough, they were. My husband stood his ground and told his mother we were leaving. In front of everyone she accused me of causing the problem, saying it was all "about me." Later, he phoned his mother and let her know how she hurt my feelings, but she would not apologize.

The following year, my mother-in-law came up only a handful of times and constantly used her health to guilt my husband about not visiting her. I was extremely welcoming and respectful to her up until then. When we went to visit, she was mad it wasn't long enough. She even gave me and my daughter dirty looks when my daughter didn't want to be held in her arms.

Christmas came around again, and my mother-in-law wanted my husband to bring my daughters to see her, with those disgusting men present. She doesn't get it. That was where it started in the first place. Later she went to "apologize" and told me she was told she had been rude to me.

My husband now says he resents me and will, if his mother dies and doesn't get to see her grandchildren. She was an emotional and neglectful mother. I don't want that in my life or the lives of my children. What should I do?

Kylie

Kylie, in his bestseller "How to Win Friends and Influence People," Dale Carnegie wrote, "A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

You think this all started with the uncles. It didn't. You made a rash promise, and a promise, even a rash one, is a commitment. You told your mother-in-law you would name your child after her. She told her friends and relatives, then she suffered the embarrassment of having to take it all back.

That's where this began. The uncles were her retaliation.

We set ourselves up for many of the problems in our life. Your mother-in-law may be thin-skinned and annoying, but you won't understand this problem until you get the timeline straight.

Your husband was once willing to take your side. Now he says, in effect, "I will never forgive you if my mother dies without seeing her grandchildren." You might be tempted to answer, "I will never forgive you if you ruin our marriage and jeopardize our daughters because you won't stand up for what is right."

But a close reading of your letter suggests your only complaint about your mother-in-law is that she can be difficult. The real issue is the uncles.

A family cannot place some of its members above morals or right and wrong. If it does, those members will become a communicable disease running through the entire family. Once you, your husband, and your mother-in-law acknowledge the true problem, it will be possible to find appropriate visiting rules.

If this is a genuine child welfare or police issue, that must be addressed as well. But there is no huge problem with your mother-in-law, except for the mistake you made.

Wayne & Tamara

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