

Helping hounds: How pets can lift spirits of patients



Holly and her owner Douglas Ruthven brave the rain. Picture: Jane Barlow

By **CLAIRE BLACK**

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Your pet dog may sometimes test your patience, but how about taking him to a care home or hospital to lift the spirits of people there. Claire Black discovers a Scottish charity that's been making that happen for 25 years

I WOULD bet you a full five Scottish pounds that there aren't many dog owners who wouldn't pay significantly more than that for an insight into the minds of their four-legged friends. I would have stretched to at least a tenner if I could have understood why my pesky pooch skated out on to the ice in Holyrood Park's loch as though it was six foot thick concrete the other morning. Or why she will run the length of the park in order to eat something disgusting, preferably rotten, when at home she enjoys a varied diet, not to mention a vast array of treats.

We may think of ourselves as a nation of dog lovers, and many of us can scarcely imagine living without our canine companions, but how much do we really know about dogs?

Did you know dogs can hear noise from four times further away than humans can? (I'm not sure how that explains how they manage not to hear a word of instruction when you're standing right next to them.) Or that their astonishing sense of smell comes from the fact that the part of their brain that controls that sense is 40 times larger than the part of the human brain that does the same for us. (My own dog knows from the bottom of Leith Walk that the bacon roll van is fully operational on Leith Links.)

A new documentary, *The Secret Life of Dogs*, uses a slew of hi-tech techniques to reveal how dogs experience the world. Macro photography, thermal images and slow-motion filming show how dogs' senses work, revealing why they bark, whether they dream and how they appear to understand what we are thinking. (For my own part, I'm hoping for some insight into why my pooch follows me relentlessly when I get out of the shower, to lick the back of my knees.)

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Dogs may test our patience, or make us feel frustrated when the training isn't going well, but people live longer if they have dogs. They can have a hugely positive impact on our physical and mental health since it has been scientifically proven that the mere action of stroking a dog (or cat) slows down our heart rate and reduces blood

pressure, making someone who has already suffered a heart attack much less likely to have another. Pets, it seems, are good for us.

That is a point on which Douglas Ruthven needs no convincing. Ruthven has been involved with the charity Canine Concern Scotland Trust for more than 15 years. A dog owner all of his life, he's now a trustee of the charity that celebrates its 25th birthday this year and incorporates Therapet, a service which organises visits by volunteer dogs and their owners in care homes and hospital wards, sheltered housing and hospices across Scotland.

In the 25 years since the charity was set up, more than 3,000 dogs have been registered as Therapets. There are between 450 and 600 active Therapets throughout Scotland, managed by a team of area organisers who recruit and support volunteers in their local area. To be involved, dogs are assessed for their suitability – they have to be calm and friendly, they have to like to be touched, they can't be skittish around unfamiliar noises. Any breed or size of dog can be a Therapet, from the smallest poodles and pugs up to Pyrenean Mountain Dogs and Rottweilers, the key issue is temperament. There are other practical issues, in that the dog has to be at least one year old and have been owned for six months so the charity is confident the owner has a good bond with their pet. In the case of dogs who visit children, they have to visit in an adult situation for at least a year first.

Ruthven says that since the turn of the year, there has been a surge of interest from people keen to register their dogs. The charity doesn't know why this spike has occurred, but clearly the word is getting round. Around 40 information packs have been sent to people potentially interested in registering their dogs.

"We now have dogs visiting all the major hospitals – the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, the Western General, the Royal Victoria, the Sick Kids," says Ruthven. The agreement between the charity and NHS Lothian has been a forerunner for agreements with other health boards. The charity has similar arrangements in Greater Glasgow, Forth Valley and Grampian. "We've got very good access and have received excellent cooperation from NHS Lothian, particularly from the voluntary services managers. We also have a new initiative which has just begun with dogs visiting the Maggie's Centre in Edinburgh. The manager there is very keen."

As to the reactions Ruthven has experienced when taking his own dog, Holly, a 13-year-old Border Collie, into visit patients in hospital or residents of a care home, he says the positive impact of a visit from a Therapet is clear. When dogs have been a big part of people's lives but they're no longer able to own one, the fact that a dog comes in once a week means that people get the opportunity to sit and chat about dogs, to remember the dogs they've owned.

"It varies, of course," he says. "You take a dog into a care home and say, 'Would you like to meet Holly?' and some people say, 'I don't like dogs,' but that's rare. Most people are delighted to have the opportunity to bend down and stroke a dog and accept a paw that Holly gives very willingly. The next thing I do is ask the person if they've owned a dog, and before you know it their life story is coming out. That's part of it – having someone to talk to on a subject that's been an important part of their life."

It's something to which Ruthven, who has two other Collies in addition to Holly, can relate: "I've rarely lived without at least one dog. I got my first from the dog and cat home for my 12th birthday. That was 62 years ago." It seems the only downside is that people delighted to spend time with the dogs sometimes want to show their appreciation by offering food that's far from ideal. Ruthven laughs. "I've had everything offered to dogs from toffees and chocolates to meringues and whole cream scones with jam. All sorts." He says that new recruits are advised to take along treats that they're happy for their dog to eat. "I know one volunteer who takes a bag of carrots."

For Clare Copland, a receptionist in Aberdeen and organiser for the Canine Concern Trust Scotland in the North-east, involvement with the charity began eight years ago when her dog, Walton, was rejected from the guide dog training that he'd nearly completed. Copland wanted to find something else to do with her quiet, calm, well-trained dog. An advert in the paper took her to Therapets. Walton is now a regular visitor in care homes, does one-to-one work with dog-phobic children and visits a unit which looks after people who have had catastrophic brain injuries or strokes.

"Walton's theme in life is to be loved by everyone and so for that reason he'll sit for however long to say hello to people and let them stroke him," says Copland. "That's particularly nice for people in care homes or long-term injury units who have had to leave their pets at home. Walton is a kind of surrogate pet." He's a good one, too. Walton was Therapet of the year in 2008 and runner-up in the competition last year.

"Taking Walton to visit people brings a lot of joy to people who are otherwise in quite a mundane situation. The older people really look

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Today



Light showers

Temperature: 3 C to 7 C
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Wind direction: West

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Light showers

Temperature: 3 C to 7 C
Wind Speed: 20 mph
Wind direction: South west

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forward to seeing him. He's invited to all the social events, he's part of the community."

The other kind of work that the charity does is with children who are dog phobic, referred by their GPs into mental health services who in turn involve CCST. This is not just about being nervous near dogs, tackling this fear can be life-changing for both children and their families. "This is about kids who see a dog on the way to school in the morning and that's it, they're at home for the rest of the day," says Ruthven. "These families are then denied the opportunity to go to a public park, to the beach – there are all sorts of restrictions on their life as a family."

Copland knows a child who's extremely frightened can, within just a few sessions, become confident enough not only to pet Walton, but to walk him on his lead. "They usually end up wanting to have their photograph taken with him," says Copland.

In *The Secret Life of Dogs*, there are personal stories attesting to dogs doing amazing feats – saving the lives of their owners, rescuing them from deadly situations or somehow detecting serious illness. Therapets aren't expected to pull off those kinds of feats but I do wonder whether Copland believes that dogs have a sixth sense about illness, be it physical or emotional?

"There are times when I'm working with a phobic child and I know that that child is particularly afraid to the extent that they would run across a road to get away from a dog.

"Walton is particularly quiet when he first meets them, whereas when he goes into a care home he's bouncing around and delighted to be there. He seems to know what's needed of him in different situations."

• *The Secret Life of Dogs* is on STV at 9pm tomorrow. For more information about the Canine Concern Scotland Trust log on to www.canineconcernscotland.org.uk

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