

Headline	Canine companionship for terminally-ill		
MediaTitle	Malay Mail		
Date	14 Aug 2012	Color	Full Color
Section	News	Circulation	20,816
Page No	13	Readership	49,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	589 cm <sup>2</sup>
Journalist	Helena Hon	AdValue	RM 6,730
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 20,190



# Canine companionship for terminally-ill

Power of human-animal interaction has positive impact on the sick and dying

By HELENA HON

helenahon@mmail.com.my

THE legacy of the late Sabrina Yeap, who fostered Dr Dog Malaysia, an animal therapy programme pioneered by Animals Asia Foundation founder Dr Jill Robinson, was carried on recently when Kasih Hospice Care Society (KHC) introduced animal therapy to its home hospice service.

Its launch at the Section 14 centre saw KHC volunteers and five Dr Dogs with their handlers put into motion a project proposed in April but was delayed by Yeap's death last month.

Robinson has since passed the baton of Dr Dog Malaysia to Salehin Ibrahim, who is managing and coordinating the 14 Dr Dogs under the programme.

Asked how a centre that provides palliative care to the terminally-ill had embarked on using dogs for therapy, KHC president Yeo Puay Huei said they had seen documentaries on the transformational power of human-animal interaction and read about the positive impact of pet visits to the sick and dying.

"Upon Googling to find out who in Malaysia could

provide animal therapy, we saw Dr Dog at Furry Friends Farm (FFF) listed," she said.

Yeo said KHC, which has provided over 25,000 man-hours of home and hospital visits through its volunteers and mobile medical team to patients, approached FFF, Yeap's no-kill animal sanctuary, to select suitable shelter dogs to help provide solace, companionship and an ear for whatever the patient may want to pour out.

"Palliative-care patients often have great emotional stress due to impending death, unfinished business or unexpressed frustrations," she said.

"Using Dr Dogs would help our volunteer break the ice as there is abundant data to show dogs have a way of interacting with people to enable communication. Most palliative care patients live between one and six months, so using animals would hasten the process of connection as time is not on our side."

KHC is working with 130 AIDS, cancer and organ failure cases through their 250 volunteers and medical team. The service is provided free.

It plans to incorporate the Dr Dog programme by having a Dr Dog and its handler visit consenting patients together with a KHC volunteer, said Pearl Thor, the general manager.

"Some patients are keen to have an animal to hold. They smile when they see the dog and this transforms their outlook."

Two dogs — Dr Bella and Dr Molly — have been selected from FFF to be animal therapists at the hospice.

"Sabrina was happy working with us as the objective of Dr Dog Malaysia was to show that shelter dogs also have value to society and that animal welfare can be achieved through human welfare and vice versa," Yeo said.

She said the canine pair, selected through a stringent process involving a temperament test and two final exams through visits to an old folks home and an autistic children centre, saw both dogs passing with flying colours.

"They were unruffled," she said, adding autistic children can be quite "intense", but Dr Bella and Dr Molly were

calm under those circumstances.

Salehin, who owns two Dr Dogs — a labrador named Dr Kylie and a border collie called Dr Sammy — said the collaboration between Dr Dog Malaysia and KHC was "timely" and shows that animal therapy was gaining prominence in Malaysia.

"Right now, Dr Dogs are spreading their special brand of canine love to thousands of people across Asia. In the West, dogs are routinely used in therapy work. The partnership has opened up another chapter in the unique alliance between man and his best friend in working together for a common good," he said.

**"Some patients are keen to have an animal to hold. They smile when they see the dog and this transforms their outlook"**

**PEARL THOR**  
GENERAL MANAGER  
KASIH HOSPICE CARE  
SOCIETY

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PETALING JAYA



**\*PAW'SOME ALLIANCE:** (From left) Fong Mei Leng with Dr Max, Helena Hon with Dr Chloe, Elaine Tan with Dr Padme, Yeo with Dr Bella and Salehin with Dr Kylie at the launch of the collaborative programme between Dr Dog Malaysia and Kasih Hospice Care Society. (Right) Yeo puts a hand over Dr Chloe while a volunteer with Dr Bella demonstrates how a patient would be given the chance to connect with a dog — Pix: HELENAHON