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Saturday June 16, 2007

Dr Dog animal-assisted therapy programme launched in Malaysia

By JAYAGANDI JAYARAJ

HAVING a pet, especially a dog, is therapeutic and those with dogs have lower stress and cholesterol levels, a stronger immune system and less chance of suffering a heart attack.

Renowned animal welfare proponent Jill Robinson, who is also the founder of Animals Asia Foundation (AAF), said being in the company of a dog could also reduce the incidence of asthma.

“The medical staff we work with through our programmes has found that patients also improved in their physical, occupational and speech therapy because the dogs motivated them to exercise their verbal and coordination skills,” said Robinson, who launched the Dr Dog animal-assisted therapy programme in 1991.

Since then, the programme had been adopted in six territories and countries – Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Japan, India and the Philippines.



Therapeutic fun: Yeap (in red), Robinson (fourth from right) and kids from the Opera Fest Children's Choir playing with some puppies at the launch of the Dr Dog programme.

And in Malaysia, Furry Friends Farm (FFF) launched Dr Dog on Saturday.

“We have made the programme work in China where dogs are recognised as food.

“I am positive it will succeed in Malaysia, especially with the pedigree pet boom,” said Robinson at the launch held at Central Park in Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya.

Robinson is known for saving China's Moon Bears from farms where they were kept so that their bile could be harvested, and has been awarded numerous honours for the work, including being made a Member of the British Empire (MBE) by Queen Elizabeth II.

She also won the Readers Digest ‘Hero For Today’ award in 1995 and the Genesis Award – which is the only major media and arts award specific to animal issues – in 2002.

FFF founder Sabrina Yeap said she shared a similar vision with AAF and that was why she got in touch with the

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organisation to start the programme.

In March, AAF sponsored a trip to Hong Kong for some FFF members to learn more about Dr Dog and how the programme could be used to benefit patients and educate Malaysians on animal welfare.

"I have accumulated a lifetime of heartache seeing animals being abused, which is why I am convinced that education is the best way to go.

"Hence, we are using only mongrels and mixed breeds for the programme to show that they are just as good as pedigrees.

"I also call on the government to open the doors to Dr Dog to visit hospitals, children and welfare homes," said Yeap.

To be in the programme, a person needs to adopt a dog and the canine must have been with its owner for at least six months.

The dog should be at least two years old to register for the programme.

Other requirements include vaccination, sterilisation and de-sexing, which helps the canine to be less aggressive.

"De-sexing also helps old dogs to be more active.

"We also need to ascertain that the dog is mature as it has to be a tolerant animal.

"Sometimes, the patient can be a child and it has to withstand treatment from kids," said Yeap.

Yeap said when a dog fulfilled the basic requirements; the owner who was a volunteer could take the dog to see the patient recommended by FFF.

"We don't allow relatives or maids to bring in the dogs because we want the real owners to bond with their pets, too.

"At the same time, we will keep tab on the programme and send reports to the AAF on the progress," said Yeap.

On Sunday, Yeap and Robinson took the first batch of Malaysia's Dr Dogs to a senior citizens' home in Old Klang Road and a youth rehabilitation centre in Taman Tan Yew Lai, Kuala Lumpur.

Also present at the launch was Remembering Sheena campaign founding member Shoba Mano.

During the launch, dog owners were seen with their canines while children took part in an art contest.

There was also a musical play by the Opera Fest Children's Choir as well as a drill performance by KO Dog Scout team.

For details of the programme, visit www.remembersheena.blogspot.com

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