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Is that a dog in the ICU?

The healing power of pups

Danielle Palmieri, RN, and Grade

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## The Healing Power of Dogs

**I**t was a tough case: a five-year-old girl awaiting a bowel and pancreas transplant, who had essentially given up the will to live. She hadn't spoken a word in days. But that was before Gracie, all two pounds of her, came to visit. Gracie, a Chihuahua rescue who belongs to Danielle Palmieri, RN, is a therapy dog in the People Animal Connection (PAC) program at UCLA. As soon as Gracie entered the room, the five-year-old perked up and her vitals returned to normal for the first time in days. "She started talking and continued for 20 minutes," says Palmieri, a high-risk labor and delivery nurse at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. "They had tried every toy in that hospital, but nothing worked like Gracie."

This Spring, PBS will air an episode of *Shelter Me*, a series looking at the positive impact of adopted shelter pets, that features PAC (see shelterme.tv for dates). PAC is one of the largest animal-assisted therapy programs in the nation, and its dogs make 800 visits a month to critically ill children

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and adults. It's a trend that's growing around the country. "Animal-assisted therapy lowers blood pressure

and normalizes respiration," says Jack Barron, PAC's former director. "I've even seen people come out of a coma in a dog's presence. People ask, 'But how do you know it was the dog?' and I say, 'How do you know it wasn't?'"

According to Barron, animal-assisted therapy wouldn't happen without the nurses, who lay the groundwork so dogs can make the visits. And nurses benefit, too: PAC dogs are also brought around to visit them, especially those in critical care. "It calms them down and puts smiles on their faces. It's rewarding to see the nurses have a few relaxing minutes," says Barron.



Danielle Palmieri, RN—a DAISY Award winner for going above and beyond the call of duty—tours the hospital in her off hours with Gracie.