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Healthy Dawgs Wellness Program: A Win-Win Situation

In the fall of 2010, the University of Georgia College of Pharmacy initiated a wellness program for UGA employees who want to learn more about their prescription medications and how to make appropriate lifestyle decisions to improve their health. Called Healthy Dawgs, the program aims to contribute to a healthier workforce on the University campus by working with selected departments each year to provide this wellness service to their employees.

Recent assessments of the program, now in its second year, show that many of its 65 participants have reported marked improvement in their health and lifestyle.

“Our interventions have led patients to stop smoking, change their diet and exercise regimens, and meet their disease state goals,” said Lindsey Welch, a public service assistant in the College’s Division of Experience Programs, who organized this program as an Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experience (IPPE) for third-year pharmacy students. Other IPPEs expose students to the hospital, retail and clinical aspects of pharmacy practice in conjunction with their traditional pharmacy courses.

At the wellness sessions, pharmacy students take a complete medical history of each patient, discuss ways to better manage the patient’s condition and help them learn more about their medications and how they work. Patients receive physical assessments, such as blood pressure, weight, waist circumference, and diabetic foot exams, and point-of-care laboratory values, such as fasting blood glucose, A1C, and lipid panels.

Educational materials are distributed about disease states, dietary and exercise patterns to prevent or improve disease, selecting over-the-counter medications that will not interfere with a patient’s disease states or their medications, and setting health goals.

As part of the Healthy Dawgs program, pharmacy students meet with patients four times over the course of the academic year. Through effective communication with each patient they expect to promote trust, improve medication adherence and encourage healthier lifestyles.

“Each visit is an opportunity to assess the patient’s progress towards health goals that the students helped the patient set at the beginning of the program,” said Linda Hughes, also a public service assistant in the Division of Experience Programs and co-instructor for the program.

Another important aspect of the program is communication between the pharmacy students and each patient’s physician in order to coordinate care. Progress notes written after each visit include recommendations to optimize drug therapy for each patient.

“The students have been able to identify drug interactions, inadequate medication therapies, and other medication-related problems and have notified the physicians of these issues,” said Welch.

“We truly feel that Healthy Dawgs is a win-win situation for the University,” she added. “Our students are able to apply their knowledge and skills to real patients, and the employees are able to take advantage of a unique program dedicated to their health.”

For more information about Healthy Dawgs, contact Welch at 706-583-0223 or Hughes at 706-542-2153.
Raising Puppies for the Blind is a 24/7 Job for Pharmacy Student

Mallory Nelson, a first-year pharmacy student, has always loved dogs, so it’s not a stretch of the imagination that she’d have one living with her during college. The unusual part is that she’s training Pepsi, a black laborador puppy, to be a guide dog for a blind person or someone with a serious disability.

“I first saw the guide dogs on campus about two years and was curious about them,” said Nelson, who found information about the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind on the internet. “Pepsi is actually the second dog I’ve trained; Ivory, a yellow lab, was the first.”

Raising the puppies is a full-time responsibility that requires constant companionship and complete dedication to their training, she added. Applicants must go through a rigorous training period themselves to make sure they’re suited to be raisers. They’re tested on their handling skills with dogs of different breeds and different personalities and assessed on their experience with dogs in order to receive a puppy that matches their skill level. A home visit is a must to make sure the puppy’s environment is suitable.

At seven to eight weeks old puppies begin their training, which lasts about a year and includes adjusting to their environment, learning basic commands, memorizing new routes, locating physical structures, such as doors, chairs, ramps and elevators, and reacting appropriately for safety concerns.

“Pepsi has an easy temperament and enjoys meeting students around campus,” Nelson said. “Each day we either walk to class or ride the bus. During class Pepsi usually sleeps.”

The New York-based Foundation has around 75 puppy raisers in the Athens area, which has the largest group of raisers anywhere in the U.S., said Jessica Jones, the Foundation’s area coordinator.

Only the most suitable dogs are placed with blind handlers, where they’re expected to remain healthy companions for seven to nine years, or longer. After becoming compatible with a blind person in the new environment, the dogs undergo another three to four weeks of training to learn the new handler’s patterns and routes.

“We try to place the perfect dog in the best possible environment,” Jones stated, adding that prospective blind handlers must have a stable lifestyle and prove themselves to be good candidates for companion dogs.

“We’re one of only a few guide dog schools that pays all expenses for the blind handler receiving a dog, including housing at the Guide Dog Foundation, training, harness and leash,” she noted.

Those not selected for service for the blind may become Vetdogs, which are used as balance dogs or retrieving dogs for veterans with disabilities such as lost or impaired limbs. Sometimes the dogs themselves develop physical problems or illnesses; others are deemed more suitable as breeders.

“During his year in training Pepsi was chosen to become a breeder, rather than a companion dog, due to his good hips and temperament,” Nelson said.

If any dogs are not good for service, she noted, their raisers may have first option for adoption.

“This entire experience has been so rewarding,” Nelson added. “I was so honored to be able to attend my last dog’s graduation in New York where I met his new owner. Everyone is so dedicated and appreciative; I definitely expect to raise another guide dog.”

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