

## Stuffed animals can be comforting for elderly patients

Knight-Ridder

DETROIT - It began with a bear. Possibly a white teddy bear. Kathy Hall can't say for sure. That was three years and a couple thousand stuffed animals ago.

What Hall does remember vividly, though, is the horrible sound of wailing that carried throughout the hospital floor.

Ma-ma! Ma-ma!

An elderly woman's grasp of reality had slipped. Curled in a fetal position, she cried out again and again. Staff members at Saratoga Hospital in northeast Detroit were unable to calm her.

The longer the pitiful shrieking continued, the more it reminded Hall of a baby crying. That gave her an idea. When small children are upset, she thought, you give them some-

thing to cuddle. Hall retrieved a stuffed animal that was kept for pediatric patients.

"I thought because she was in a childlike state that maybe this would comfort her somehow," says Hall, the nurse manager on the senior care unit. "She just clutched it instinctively, and it did quiet her down. It seemed therapeutic."

You won't read about "stuffed therapy" in any medical journal. But the 30 nurses and aides on Saratoga's seniors ward liberally apply the unique treatment to elderly patients. Between 2,000 and 3,000 donated stuffed animals have been handed out to people 65 and older who suffer from mental deterioration or loneliness.

The hospital staff has found that these small acts of compassion can make a big difference in the lives of those who often have almost nothing.

"What started out as one, simple act by Kathy has turned out to be a terrific ministry for our older patients," says Helmut Michelson, the hospital chaplain. "These may be just stuffed animals to us, but to many of our patients they are true companions."

These are not used stuffed toys, Hall explains. They are "previously loved." She's also fond of calling them "babies." That's because patients often will hold them in their arms and say: "This is my baby."

This medication for the soul is dispensed freely. Whenever nurses think a patient could use some cheering up, they reach for a stuffed critter.

Many elderly hospital patients have precious little to distract them.

"It's about stepping into the shoes of somebody who's lying there and has nothing, and letting them know that somebody cares about them," says Hall, whose official title is administrative director of medical patient care services. "People are afraid when they go into a hospital. Maybe they have no family, no visitors. Nobody. Maybe they haven't had a gift in 20 years."

Or perhaps, like the first patient who got a stuffed animal right after the senior care unit opened in December 1993, they suffer from dementia - diminished mental ability.

"A lot of these people suffer from Alzheimer's and senility," Michelson says. "They go back to their own childhood where they think that this is their first teddy bear, and they just light up."

Stuffed therapy quickly expanded to anyone who seemed depressed on the 28-bed senior unit at Saratoga, which joined the St. John Health System last October. While Hall was concerned about offending people at first, she soon realized that just about everyone - men included - liked getting stuffed animals. Patients also seemed to appreciate the heartfelt manner in which the toys were given.

Sometimes, though, Hall consults with her nurses about whether a particular patient will understand the gesture. Once, a woman threw her animal across the room.

"But another time I asked if we should try an animal on this one lady who was pretty wild," Hall says. "So I took it in. This woman picked it up and looked and looked at it. Pretty soon she was kissing it and cradling it. When you see something like that, you get a lump in your throat. We've all been in tears many times watching the reactions of patients."

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