

“He likes feet,” I told the petite patient sitting in the waiting area prior to her chemotherapy appointment. Her tiny feet had disappeared underneath the black fur of Ranger, my Bernese Mountain Dog. Hoping he wasn’t hurting her as he rested on top of her shoes, I asked if she would like him to move. “Oh no,” she replied, “He knows I need attention today—I buried my husband yesterday.” I stood speechless. How did he know? I had no idea how he knew, but, somehow, he did.

This is just one example of the many rewarding experiences shared by dog therapy teams who visit Virginia Oncology Associates (VOA). As handlers, we get to offer a few minutes of distraction for the anxious patient, the worried relative or friend, and even the hard-working VOA staff member. For the dogs, they get treated to loads of attention with lots of petting and some scratching behind the ears.

Ranger and I started visiting VOA’s Lake Wright location in May 2007 after shadowing Diane Zaba, the dog therapy coordinator, and her charming Shetland Sheepdogs, Zachary and Zoe, to learn more about how the program works. Towards the end of our first visit, Ranger pulled me towards a man sitting by himself, holding a large envelope in his hands. I suspected he might have x-rays with him and perhaps he too was there for the first time. As Ranger stood alongside the man’s chair, he scratched Ranger’s head and commented, “He must know I’m nervous.” I was so proud of Ranger that he got rewarded with a plain cheeseburger on the way home!

Doing pet therapy requires discretion, as patients need to feel their privacy is being protected. It also involves a different sort of dialogue when engaging in conversation. “How are you today?” doesn’t seem like the right thing to say when not one of them wishes to be waiting for chemotherapy or radiation. Having the dogs there is a natural conversation starter. Those in the lobby areas will often tell us about their own dogs they have at home or maybe a special one they have lost. In the case of Ranger, I am often asked what type of dog he is, with many assuming he is a Saint Bernard. “Same country but different dog,” I reply. “How much does he weigh?” This is the other question I get asked repeatedly. Currently, he weighs 113 lbs.—a big boy but not so much when standing next to Baron, a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog and the most majestic of the dogs that visit VOA.

There are many wonderful teams who visit Virginia Oncology Associates and Ranger and I are fortunate to participate in this program. We get to make a difference by connecting with people over the shared joy of a beautiful dog.

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