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Beverly Collis looks forward to her weekly session with Paige Cushman as a brief respite from coping with the lung cancer that has invaded her body and shattered the retirement she and her husband had planned.

Cushman, a licensed massage therapist, will soothe away the aches and pains of muscles strained by stress and prolonged bed confinement.

As Cushman untangles the price exacted from dealing with a disease that envelops the entire body, Collis can let her mind unwind and temporarily escape the reality of a diagnosis in April that led her to Hospice of Marion County by May.

As Collis receives her massage, Gibson, her mini dachshund, sleeps contentedly in his kennel.

Customarily he is on super alert when others are with Collis, but he has accepted Cushman's soothing touch, just like his owner.

"We are a two-massage pair now," said Collis. "He seems to really enjoy the mini-massage Paige gives him and it seems to calm him down. I am in total awe of all that Hospice has done for me. To have my dog get special attention is just wonderful. It helps compensate for things I can't do with him now."

Cushman, an animal lover, believes her patients with bonded pet relationships benefit from continuing that connection through life's ultimate challenge.

"Hospice care is about making our patients' lives as comfortable and as stress-free as possible. We are there to be supportive to what the patient needs and wants," she said. "By my spending five minutes or so giving their dog or cat a massage, I can reduce that animal's stress level. I can calm them down and they usually fall asleep. This can make the entire environment more relaxing."

Cushman performs the pet's massage while she obtains her patient's status and discusses goals for the day.

Stress reduction and relaxation are cornerstones of the massage therapy program offered by Hospice.

"Repeated studies nationwide demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of massage therapy to Hospice patients. In 1994, we incorporated the service into the holistic team approach utilized by our agency for patient care. By careful allocation of our funding streams, we are able to offer the therapy at no cost to the patients who desire it," said Lisa Varner, Hospice of Marion County spokeswoman.

The benefits of massage therapy to cancer patients have been recognized in numerous studies, according to the American Massage Therapy Association.

Among cited cases is a three-year study on oncology patients, which confirmed that Swedish massage contributed toward significant pain reduction.



Paige Cushman, a Hospice massage therapist, left, gives Beverly Collis a massage as her dog, Gibson, a 10-month-old long-haired dachshund, sits with her at her home in McIntosh on July 22. Paige Cushman, a Hospice massage therapist, left, gives Beverly Collis a massage as her dog, Gibson, a 10-month-old long-haired dachshund, sits with her at her home in McIntosh on July 22.

Swedish massage is one of a number of modality techniques available to therapists, although most utilize very gentle massage with cancer patients, according to Cushman.

Varner stressed that Hospice can enter the patient's care when the life expectancy is six months or less, and they strongly encourage patients to enroll as soon as they have a diagnosis.

Dr. John Lane, D.V.M., professor emeritus of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Florida and founder of Pets Uplifting People, enumerated therapeutic benefits of close pet relationships and the terminally ill.

"A pet can serve to stimulate an interest in something or somebody other than one's own self. The exchange of feelings (between pet and patient) brings about an emotional and physical sense of relaxation and endorphin release for both individuals. The results are a lower heart rate, reduction in stress level and an overall sense of well-being for the person," he wrote via e-mail.

Cushman echoed Lane's observation, stating, "All of my patients who have elected massage therapy report experiencing stress reduction and they seem to gain a sense of comfort from the simple compassion of touch. There are also physical benefits such as treating edema (swelling caused by fluid retention) that massage can reduce."

Five patients on her case load have close relationships with their pets and have elected massage as part of their treatment modality.

Extending the benefits of massage to the pets seemed a logical extension to Cushman.

"He is a wonderful little dog and a comfort," she said. "I am so glad he shares in the TLC I get with my angels from Hospice."