For years Darla Allen looked for the perfect volunteer job that would fulfill her while filling a need in the community.

Six years ago the 55-year-old had her dog, Mulligan, trained by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), to provide pet therapy to people in hospitals and other institutions like nursing homes.

Mulligan, an 11-year-old Sheltie, loves to do tricks and give kisses, never bothered by the occasional tail-pulling or screaming child. Her other, more youthful Sheltie, Bogey, is more reserved but very sweet. He is content burying his head in the lap of a patient and falling asleep.

But until several months ago, the trio was limited to visiting very sick children in hospital beds or the elderly in local nursing homes — neither of which allows for much patient-pet interaction.

When Nemours Children’s Clinic opened a larger facility on Orange Avenue last year, they were able to expand the pet therapy program, having the dogs come in several times a week to the waiting area where some days they will see more than 30 kids in one hour.

“In Nemours other clinic it was mostly oncology and hematology patients who were really sick. They were not able to get on the dog’s level and really enjoy them. At the nursing homes we visited, there also was limited interaction,” Allen said.

Children coming in for a checkup, as well as those with longer stays ahead of them, are able to come into the waiting area, some with IV poles in tow, to play with the dogs.

“Sometimes there will be eight kids at once all around one dog. It really brightens their day,” she said.

“It was amazing. Once the children, staff and parents see the pet, a smile comes across their face. There is such joy there,” Mondry said.

“Some children go right up and hug the dog and others hold off a little and kind of look until they get a little more comfortable and make their way closer to the dog. For many patients it is the first time they ever pet a dog.”

According to Nemours spokesperson Jarrod Cady, research suggests that pets can relieve anxiety about seeing a doctor. Pet therapy is designed to improve the emotional well being of the patient and reduce stress.

When the Nemours Children’s Hospital opens in Lake Nona in 2012, Cady said they plan to further study the therapeutic healing benefits of gardens and animals in a hospital setting.

“We are already looking for ways to start that process of study early on, before we get that hospital up and running. It is important because there is evidence that it helps patients, but it has never been studied on such a large scale as we are planning to accomplish in conjunction with the Harmony Institute (a nonprofit foundation that promotes the psychological, emotional and public health values of living in an integrated balance with companion animals, wildlife and environmental ecologies),” he said.

“If it is found to be beneficial, it could have national effects.”

Nemours is also planning to incorporate gardens into the building process of the hospital, Cady said.

Mondry said the entire atmosphere in the waiting room changes when the dogs come to visit. Instead of being nervous about their doctor visit, as many children are, they are having a good time. This is also beneficial to the doctor.

“Now when the kids see the doctor they are excited, talking about the dogs they just saw. The doctors are able to better interact with the kids and do their job.
Pet visits - Like no other.

A nearly all pet foods have corn, wheat or other fillers that have no nutritional value and do nothing for your pet except promote allergies, rashes and even diseases. Some pet food and treat manufacturers use cancer-causing chemicals and a less toxic version of automotive antifreeze to preserve their foods and treats.

The bottom line is, you need to be aware of what goes into pet foods. Read and understand the ingredient lists on everything you feed your pet. What is the problem with having corn in your pet’s food? The problems are both physical and mone-

Tary! Physically, humans have problems digesting corn. Your pets’ digestive track is considerably shorter than ours so they have even less time to make use of any nutrition that may be in corn. Most of the corn ends up in your backyard. Corn has also been shown to be one of the leading causes of aller-
gies in pets along with wheat and soy. So if your pet has excessive shedding, itching or hot spots, before you spend the money on allergy tests, try feeding a food without corn, wheat or soy.

The monetary problem is that you are paying for something that provides your pet no value. Look for a pet food that has 100 per-
cent natural ingredients that pro-
mote good health, without any filler or other harmful ingredients. Make sure that you understand what is on the ingredient label of the food you are feeding your pet. Things like animal fat and by-prod-
ucts sound harmless enough but may contain things that could cause future problems with your pets.

Gabriella Vega, a patient at Nemours Children’s Clinic, with Mulligan, a SPCA regis-
tered dog.