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***Psychosomatics* Offers Psychiatrists Clinical Recommendations for Service Dogs in the ICU**

Bethesda, MD — The use of service animals for people with either physical or mental disabilities continues to grow in the United States. As a result, physicians need to understand the criteria for, and employment of, service animals for patients with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a service animal as “any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.” Service animals are sometimes confused with emotional support animals (ESAs), which are defined as any animal that provides emotional support, comfort therapy, companionship, therapeutic benefits, or promotes emotional well-being. ESAs, however, are not protected under the ADA, although state and local statues may apply.

“Patients must be able to describe specific tasks that an animal is trained to do for it to qualify as a service animal,” stresses Dr. Laurel Pellegrino of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Washington and lead author of “*Service Dogs in the ICU: Helpful or Harmful?*” in the May/June issue of *Psychosomatics*, the Journal of the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine. “The ADA specifies that a service animal must perform specific tasks, as opposed to solely providing comfort,” she adds.

Because practitioners of Psychosomatic Medicine are increasingly being asked to help manage service animals in hospital settings, they need to be familiar with ADA guidelines regarding service animals, as well as understand the difference between ESAs and service animals. The ADA allows physicians to ask: “Is the animal required for a disability (not what the disability is) and what work the animal is trained to perform?” “It’s also essential that Psychosomatic Medicine physicians keep informed about local and state regulations,” says Dr. Pellegrino.

Ethical issues also need to be considered by Psychosomatic Medicine physicians, according to the authors of the *Psychosomatics* article.

The article further offers recommendations to managing patients’ requests for animals in hospitals. Some of the questions to consider:

* What are the risks and benefits of allowing the animal to stay with its handler?
* Is the dog housebroken and can the handler keep control of the animal?
* Is the dog up-to-date with its vaccinations?
* How will the patient care for the animal so that the hospital staff does not have to?
* Is there something preventing the animal from being in the hospital at all times?

Ultimately, psychiatry consultants may be asked to help set boundaries for service animals in hospitals so they should know local, state, and federal regulations to do so fairly and legally. “We believe this will become even more relevant as the use of service animals among psychiatric patients increases in the future,” says Dr. Pellegrino.

The Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, a professional society of more than 1,200 leading physicians, represents psychiatrists dedicated to the advancement of medical science, education, and health care for persons with co-morbid psychiatric and general medical conditions.

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