

reallife

# Paws for thought

Pet therapy is helping thousands of patients across the country

By LOUISE FINN

IT IS a crisp, autumnal afternoon and Sam the Labradoodle is confidently leading the way down the corridor of St Doolagh's Park Care and Rehabilitation Centre near Malahide in Co Dublin.

It is clear that he knows exactly where he is going as he turns into a day room. Immediately, there is much cooing and awing and patting as the ladies in the room greet their canine pal on his weekly visit.

Sam and his owner Vincent Fennelly are a visiting team with Irish Therapy Dogs, a charity that arranges for dogs to visit care centres, hospitals, schools and nursing homes where it is not possible for residents to keep pets.

Irish Therapy Dogs has over 260 dogs as members and they visit facilities — alongside their owners — in 26 counties.

Chief executive Brenda Rickard says the organisation was set up in 2008 with the purpose of providing pet therapy across the country. "Someone doesn't need to speak but can just put their hand on the dog and they get comfort that way," says Brenda, summing up what makes the charity so special.

St Doolagh's Park is a centre for patients with acquired brain injuries, which might be the result of stroke, an accident or a medical condition like dementia.

Activities co-ordinator Juliet Ryan, who arranges the Irish Therapy Dogs' visits, says Sam has been visiting for just over a year. Residents missed their previous therapy dog, Daisy, who had become ill and could no longer visit. Sam bounded into the breach and soon became a firm favourite with staff and patients alike.

"Sam is usually here for an hour and a half. The whole house gets to see him. The girls would be very good, they'd be making cakes for Vincent and everything," says Juliet.

"That's not true. There's no evidence of cake. . ." jokes Vincent.

Dressed in the charity's uniform of bright yellow, Sam's owner has a lovely, gentle presence.

He first became involved with Irish Therapy Dogs after his wife Erin brought Sam to the Tara Winthrop Clinic in Swords.

When Vincent became self-employed his wife suggested that volunteering with Sam might be something he would enjoy.

"I found it difficult, initially, because of the condition of some of the people we visit," says Vincent. But it wasn't long before he found that any nerves were easily overcome through the friendships he built with the residents of St Doolagh's Park.

"I have a great relationship with everybody now. I really enjoy it and it has changed completely for me. I found that, over time, you forget about everything and you're just coming to see your friends," says Vincent.

He takes time to sit with each of the residents, knows everyone by name and asks each and every one of them about their week. "You would miss the people if you didn't see them. When you see the effect the dog has on people, I'd feel I was letting them down if I didn't turn up."



**Could you and your pet become an Irish Therapy Dogs visiting team?**

**"THERE is a strict process before you can become a visiting team. All our volunteers are garda vetted and have to have two references. There is an assessment of the person and the dog, working together as a team. The person needs to be well motivated, caring and discreet and well tuned into their dog.**

**"Their dog can't be too lively or too docile, afraid of noises or petting. People also need to have their dog well groomed, that's very important. We take all breeds apart from restricted breeds but it doesn't matter what size the dog is.**

**"We've a lot of rescue dogs, a lot of liquorice all-sorts on board. It is the nature of the dog that is important." — Irish Therapy Dogs Chief Executive Brenda Rickard.**

You become increasingly aware of Sam's effect on the residents when you watch their reactions to him as he makes his way around the centre.

The very bubbly Kathryn Norris is one of the first to greet Sam. She has a plate of ham waiting for him as she knows it's one of his favourite treats.

Kathryn talks about her own dog Oscar. Sam reminds her of him.

Juliet explains that this is a very beneficial thing for residents: "Sam might trigger a memory for them of a dog they've had in the past and we can tap into that, which is something that is really important."

Kathryn sums up why she enjoys Sam's visits saying: "I love him visiting us. Do you see how cute he is? He is so cute. I'd be dying to see him every week. 'When is Sam coming?' Every Sunday I'm asking that."

Evelyn Hobbs is immaculately turned out and enjoying a cup of tea in the day room while she waits on Sam and Vincent. She is stylish, funny and speaks engagingly about the importance of Sam in the residents' lives.

"He looks so interested and seems to take in all that is happening around him. I think he's a great pet and he is extremely well-behaved. It's amazing — they say on a Sunday that Sam's in tomorrow and it seems to bring a great spirit to the place. People look forward to it."

Gerard Atkinson has been a resident at the centre for seven months. For him, Sam's visits are a break from the daily activities.

"It breaks up the day, rather than sitting down and watching telly. It's great," he says, adding, "I used to have dogs at home all the time, always, since I was a nipper. It's like a bit of home, having Sam come in."

We visit another resident, Finbar Kavanagh, in his room. He speaks very little and asks



quietly about Sam, "Does he eat much?" Before Sam and Vincent arrived Finbar had been lying on his bed, but when Sam comes into the room Finbar sits up.

Sam bounds up on the bed beside him. Juliet explains: "We would have some residents who don't choose to speak. They all have acquired



