

Not everyone wants a Dog Visit



BIG DOGS, SMALL ROOMS

—Steve Reiman, TDV President and Founder

It was a normal evening at the Fletcher Allen Health Center and my German Shepherds were well oriented to the routine. Of course, as I tell new members, no visit is ever “ordinary”; something new and memorable will always happen to TDV volunteer teams. But, I was not prepared to meet the man I call “The Svede”.

It was a number of years ago, and I was alone that evening because my teammate had called in sick. So, I made my normal rounds, ending up outside of the small waiting room near the surgical center. As a matter of courtesy, and now policy, I asked the visitors if they would like a visit from a couple of therapy dogs. On previous visits, this was a place where therapy dogs were always welcome. Visitors were often tired of sitting for hours, kids were cranky, and relatives were worried. As can be expected, the visitors had no idea as to what was happening at that moment to their loved ones in an operating room just down the hall. The distraction of TDV therapy dogs was always welcome... until that night.

Some of you knew me and my Sheps back then. Lily was the founding TDV dog and Jordan, her half-sister. Since they are among the “guard dog” breeds, GSDs can be intimidating by their very nature. So, I dressed them in various costumes, and the patients eagerly took to them as friendly visitors and not at all frightening. But, not “The Svede”.

He was sitting in the room with family members. From what I deduced, he was just visiting “The New World” when a friend or relative became ill and had to be rushed to surgery. I asked “Would anyone like a visit from Therapy Dogs?” Although I do not remember anything else about that evening, I still remember “The Svede” looking long and hard at Lily & Jordan, dressed in hospital scrubs with masks, stethoscopes, hospital badges identifying them as Dr. Lily & Dr. Jordan, and pagers clipped to their scrubs. Slowly, he turned to his companions and said in a loud and clear voice “Vell, I can see dat here in your country juust like in ours, ev’ry village has a Village Idiot.”

OK, fellow TDV members, listen up. I learned some serious lessons that evening. Check out the sidebar...

I am confident that all of these years later, “The Svede” is telling people in the old country about the Village Idiot he met in Vermont who was accompanied by two four legged hairy doctors. Ayeup, and I am still telling people about him.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- First, laugh at myself, but most of all, **be considerate of others**. Some people do not like dogs. Some people are frightened of dogs. Some people just want to be left alone. As much as you and I might love visiting with a therapy dog under similar situations, others will not.
- Please **stay out of small waiting rooms**—especially if you are bringing a big dog. Ask people if they would like to step outside the room to visit with your dog. “The Svede” might still have considered me the Village Idiot but at least he would not have been bothered by my dogs’ presence.
- **Ask permission** before entering larger waiting rooms. There may be someone there who has been traumatized by a dog and is still petrified of them. Some people are highly allergic to dogs. Some children will not tell you this because they do not know or because they want to pat your dog regardless of the consequences.
- **No dog is truly hypoallergenic**. Please do not say this to visitors or patients as this is a real threat and disregard for the person’s condition.
- **Keep your dog close to you while on duty**. People are not expecting to see dogs in the facilities we visit. Please do not surprise them. Keep your dog close to you at all times. One of our policies is that dogs be on four foot leads (or shorter). Oh, yea, we only handle one dog at a time now.