



By Chris Jones

# RESEARCH

## *Canine companions combat*

### SUNDOWN SYNDROME

When Dr. Barbara McCabe's mother died of Alzheimer's disease it reaffirmed the decision she made more than 20 years ago — to become a gerontological nurse.

Since then, Barbara McCabe, Ph.D., associate professor of nursing at the UNMC College of Nursing Lincoln Division, has worked with patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other age-associated disorders.

"The issue and work with Alzheimer's patients is important to me. After working with these patients and watching my mother live with this, I am in search of new ways to help those who

are suffering from this devastating disease," Dr. McCabe said.

One new way is with man's best friend.

Dr. McCabe is part of a team of researchers in the College of Nursing who have found that therapy dogs can give Alzheimer's patients

relief from sundown syndrome.

Sundown syndrome, common in patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease, causes restlessness, confusion, aimless wandering, agitation and aggressive behavior. It typically arises in the evening as Alzheimer's patients become uncooperative, making management of their care difficult for the health-care staff. The aggressive behaviors may lead to alienation, loneliness and fear, and ultimately may result in increased aggressiveness.

"The use of dogs with Alzheimer's patients was first proposed several years ago, as it was believed that the attention and love of an animal could assist in the treatment of those suffering from Alzheimer's," Dr. McCabe said.

Working with Dr. McCabe during this research project was Mara Baun, DNSc., professor emeritus and former associate dean for research at the College of Nursing. Dr. Baun now is the Lee and Joseph D. Jamail Distinguished Professor of Nursing and Director of the Physiological Measurement Center at the University of Texas at Houston School of Nursing.

Pets have been used successfully in health care to reduce stress, and provide affection and companionship with those who have reduced ability to socialize, Dr. McCabe said.

Social isolation is a concern in Alzheimer's patients. Family visits may not be possible and staff is limited in the time spent with residents. Although patients lose their ability to initiate relationships, they still need social interaction. We have found that therapy dogs can fill those needs.

In UNMC's study, 28 patients in three Midwestern extended-care facilities were involved with the dogs. The results were published last year in the *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*.

The results showed that therapy dogs may produce positive effects by inducing relaxation and distracting patients from agitation.

Researchers say the presence of a therapy dog evokes looks, smiles, leans and touches from patients, which indicates interest and pleasure with the dog's appearance.

"We hope the results will open new avenues and approaches to increase the quality of life for persons with Alzheimer's disease," Dr. McCabe said.

For more information about the study, contact the College of Nursing at (402) 472-7363. *d*



Vicky Cerino

Bill, an Alzheimer's patient, pets "Sadie" and talks with Barbara McCabe, Ph.D., associate professor of nursing, UNMC College of Nursing Lincoln Division.