Sometimes, the best remedy doesn’t come in a pill or from a shot. Sometimes, the best “medicine” has fur, walks on four legs and radiates cuteness.

That’s where Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge’s pet visitation program comes into play. The program allows dogs to enter hospitals to visit patients, their family and staff, as deliberate interaction with a pet has been scientifically proven to provide a calming – even healing – experience.

Pet visitation has been an active part of the Blue Ridge’s volunteer program, says Susan Pollpeter, director of volunteer services at Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge. Dogs ranging from a Great Dane to shiatsu have rotated through the hospitals seeing dozens of patients per visit.

“We have had many stories of mental health patients who are not responding during daily interactions, but when the pet comes in, there is a smile, a single tear – sometimes a hand will reach out to the pet,” Pollpeter says. “It warms your heart to see a patient who previously wasn’t engaging with others, get up and run around the room or play ball with the dogs.”

Pet visitation has been clinically proven to help lower blood pressure and reduce pain, anxiety, depression and fatigue in people with a range of health problems.

“Research has shown that therapy dogs can have measurable health benefits in patients,” says Shelly Dul with Carolinas HealthCare System, citing a recent study of 76 adults with advanced heart failure.

In the study, each patient received either a 12 minute visit from a volunteer with a therapy dog, a 12 minute visit from a volunteer only or 12 minutes of his or her usual care.

Compared with the “usual-care” group, the canine group had greater decreases in blood pressure during and after the visits. Compared with the “volunteer-only” group, the “canine” group had greater decreases in stress hormone levels and total anxiety during and after each visit.

In another study, 28 patients interacted with a therapy dog for 15 minutes about half an hour before they had an MRI while six other patients had no interaction before their MRI.

The results showed that interaction with a therapy dog could be used in place of drug therapy to reduce patient anxiety,” says Dul.

Gary Parrott and his dog, Otie, a 18-pound, half poodle and half shiatsu, volunteer as part of the pet therapy program at Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge. “Otie has been a volunteer pet therapy dog for several years and was certified by Therapy Dog International,” Pollpeter says. “Not only does Otie know several commands and tricks, but he’s been designated as a “Canine Good Citizen” by the American Kennel Association.”

Pollpeter says, “The duo is constantly praised for their commitment and compassion to provide a pleasing healing experience. Folks just love Otie wherever he goes.”