Photo by Randy Cohen

starting a program

HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Fayetteville, Ark., started its program a year ago after setting policies and procedures and completing training with staff and volunteers. Each dog is required to pass obedience, personality and medical tests. While often called "pet therapy," owners and therapists who work with these animals quickly correct the "faux paw."

"Pet therapy implies your dog is seeing a psychiatrist," said Toni Thorn, the volunteer who originated the program. "There is a big difference between pets visiting a hospital or nursing home, which is an Animal Assisted Activity (AAA), and AAT where the animal is functioning as an adjunct to the therapy. At HealthSouth you have the therapist, the handler and the dog working together on therapy that is goal-directed. Just like everything else, it's written up and the success measured."

Thorn and Davis work with patient Dwight Buras on balance and walking skills *(top left)*. Bernard works with patient and therapist on brushing skills *(top right)*. The benefits to patients show in their reaction to the animals *(below)*.

The dogs are used in a variety of ways during speech, occupational and physical therapies. Patients recovering from a variety of illnesses including stroke, brain injury and heart attack can benefit from AAT.

"In physical therapy we use them for walking and other basic skills, such as balance, by playing fetch," said Janeane Davis, PT, at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Fayetteville. "In speech therapy the patient is asked to name different features on the dog and give basic commands. When the patient gets close to giving the correct command, the handler gives a hand signal and the dog obeys. It gives the patient a sense of accomplishment."

Dwight Buras, one of the hospital's first AAT patients and

Photo by Darren Gibbins, The Forum of Fargo, ND