



New alliance for animal-assisted services

Canada's "fragmented and unmonitored" animal-assisted services may soon be transformed through the world's first national alliance. Joanne Moss, founder of the Canadian Alliance for Animal-Assisted Services (CAFAAS), says a national organization would help establish standards and accreditation, raise funds, increase awareness, initiate research and improve client services.

Animal-assisted services include guide dogs for the blind, hearing-ear dogs, special-skills dogs, seizure-alert dogs, therapeutic riding programs and animal-assisted therapy programs. Dogs also help autistic children become more open and communicative, and horses assist in the physical development of people with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, multiple sclerosis and muscular dystrophy. As well, monkeys have been trained to help paralysed people live more independently.

These services reduce, or even eliminate, the need for 24-hour attendant care. However, there is little research into the utility of service animals, and no national standards. Furthermore, there is no national voice for the 150 service-provider organizations and an undetermined number of individuals involved in the field in Canada.

Moss, a child-care worker who has volunteered for 6 years in the companion-animal visitation program, saw an opportunity to improve services and founded CAFAAS in February 1998. "I know firsthand the benefits of [animal assistance] and the detriments of poor training," says Moss. The alliance has a 6-member board and 4 regular volunteers, but size is deceiving — they have big plans.

CAFAAS is hoping to attract a broad membership that includes those who use service animals, trainers and therapy associations, as well

CAFAAS photo



Joanne Moss and her dog Star visit a seniors' home

as health care professionals and veterinarians. It already has an advisory council on insurance issues, and Moss says it hopes to form others. "It's ambitious, no doubt about that."

More information is available from Moss, 613 830-8107; PO Box 62038, Gloucester ON K1C 7H8. — *Barbara Sibbald*

You too can be an expert witness!

Being an expert witness in a civil case can be a lucrative experience for physicians but it can also be harrowing, panel members told a recent Ottawa conference. And physicians' ability to cope with the pressure will depend on their understanding of the court process.

Roman Silberfeld, an American lawyer whose firm represented consumers in the Dalkon Shield and breast-implant class-action suits, said physicians will have to change their way of thinking when they enter the courtroom. Science relies on proof, Silberfeld told the June conference of the International Society of Technology Assessment in Health Care, but the courts rely on probability. "Claims have to be brought in quickly — usually within 1 to 2 years. Often the science lags behind, and rightly so — scientists are looking for definitive answers." Silberfeld says this creates a tension between the courts and scientists.

The key issue is usually causation, he says, and this is where experts "disagree most vociferously." It's important to remember that the court defines causation as "something that is a substantial factor in bringing about an injury or event. It doesn't have to be the only 1, it could be 1 of 10."

James Murphy, a biostatistician at the University of Colorado who often serves as an expert witness, likens the process to writing a scientific article: the evidence is gathered, reviewed (by peers or lawyers) and then published in a journal (or presented in court). The difference is that in court physicians have to think on their feet. His best advice: be exact and be prepared.

Silberfeld says experts must ensure that a case falls within their area of expertise and they must know all there is to know about the literature. Above all, they must ensure that all statements they make in court are absolutely correct: a single error can destroy these witnesses' credibility. — *Barbara Sibbald*