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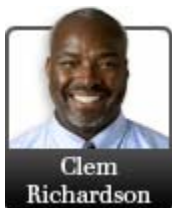
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Caring for vision of dedicated guide dogs

Monday, March 30th 2009, 4:00 AM

They help the blind and nearsighted move about town, and find hidden drugs and lost people.

But service dogs sometimes need help, too.

That's why Dr. Alexandra van der Woerd, an ophthalmology veterinarian with the Animal Medical Center, in conjunction with the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists, will give free eye exams for registered service dogs May 3 through May 9.

Last year, some 60 dogs and their owners visited van der Woerd and ophthalmology technician Yasmin Hormaza, at the Animal Medical Center's facility on E.63rd St. in Manhattan during the program's first year.

"AMC has had a program for Seeing Eye dogs for many years," van der Woerd said. "Last year I called up one of the people involved with police dogs, so we had a bunch of police dogs come in."

Like humans, dogs can suffer a variety of vision problems, from cataracts to glaucoma and many other ailments, she said.

"Cataracts are very different in dogs versus in people," she said. "In people, they are usually associated with old people, like your grandmother would have cataract surgery. But in dogs, it's usually a genetic abnormality, or a secondary symptom of another disease, like diabetes."

Cataracts also occur more frequently in certain breeds. Poodles and Bichons can develop the disease in four to seven years; Labradors in four to six, she said.

"I have seen a cocker spaniel blind with cataracts at 6 months of age," she said. Cataracts are usually treated with surgery.

Basic vision testing for dogs "is still fairly crude, because you can't ask them to read a chart," van der Woerd said.

But two pieces of equipment are available to the ophthalmology veterinarian.

One is a slit-lamp biomicroscope used to check for abnormalities in the cornea, iris, lens and other parts at the front of the eye. Van der Woerd said she also examines the fundus, "basically, it's the retina," at the back of the eye. The other tool is a Tonopen, used to check the animal for glaucoma and pressure in the eyeball.

Treatments can vary.

"If it's something we can medically manage, we send them home after treatment and follow up later," van der Woerd said. "If it requires surgery or additional testing, we schedule another visit."

Van der Woerd said she signed up for the national program because "these animals are incredibly important for the people they work for. The need is straightforward for the guide dog. They have to have good eyes to be able to guide their charges."

Despite their own impairment, blind owners often notice their animals are having vision problems.

"Some of them come in and say, 'My dog's left eye is squinting,'" she said. "They know their dogs so well, they pick up on it somehow."

The doctor said she has occasionally come across animals whose vision is so impaired that they must be taken out of service.

"What is more common is I see an abnormality and I say, 'What I want you to do is go back to your school

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and have them evaluate the dog to make sure he is still doing his work properly.' If he is, we will just follow him closely," she said.

The free exams are available to service dogs that are registered with the ACVO at this Web site: www.acvoeyexam.org.

Dogs registered and trained with the Delta Society are also eligible. For information, call Hormaza at (212) 838-8100, extension 8691.

Also go to the Web site, www.acvo.com.

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Dr. VanDerWoerd is the VERY best there is. She saved my little jack russell's vision! I cannot say enough great things about her. The eyes of dogs could not be in better hands. Jackie and Tate's mom.

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