

Assistance Animals, a colour VHS video and booklet produced by the Unit for Veterinary Continuing Education (1991), 34 min. Available from UVCE, The Royal Veterinary College, London NW1 0TU. Price: £26 (UK & Europe), £32 (outside Europe) with special reductions for relevant individuals and organizations.

The therapeutic value of animals to man has long been understood; in the 18th century, rabbits and poultry were used to help mental patients. Many of us know about the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and have admired the training which permits the dogs to lead their charges through the obstacle course of daily living. We have probably also seen Riding for the Disabled in action, and the remarkable effect this can have on physically and mentally handicapped children.

This video describes more recent developments in putting the human-companion animal bond to practical use. It concentrates on Dogs for the Disabled — founded in 1986 in Kenilworth and which draws on the experience of the Guide Dogs Association in the selection, breeding and training of dogs; Hearing Dogs for the Deaf, which arrived in Britain from the USA in 1982, and the Pets as Therapy scheme, which was set up in 1983 to encourage owners of suitably extrovert dogs to have them trained and then to take them to hospitals and residential homes to bring joy to the patients.

This is a well-made video, as one has come to expect from the UVCE. It describes itself as a pilot programme, and was developed with an educational grant from Friskies — a division of the Nestlé company. It will be of interest to veterinarians caring for assistance animals; to people advising disabled or handicapped people; to managers of long-term homes where dogs could be welcome visitors; to prison and probation authorities who are looking at ways of using animals, or who need convincing of the positive emotional effects that caring for an animal can have on a prisoner, and the reductions in violence, suicide, drug abuse and recidivism that can result.

Many of the dogs used by Dogs for the Disabled, and most of those used by Hearing Dogs, are unwanted animals taken by their owners to animal shelters. It is good to think that such animals can become useful and loved, rather than facing the likelihood of euthanasia.

People wishing to train dogs themselves for assistance purposes will probably not find enough detail in the video. It is hoped that subsequent ones are planned, with more detailed information, which could be of practical use to both animal and human welfare organizations around the world who are keen to develop training methods. Perhaps that would be the appropriate time to discuss the precautions which should be taken to prevent the possible over-exploitation of these animals which, seemingly become such willing slaves to mankind.

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