Making a Difference…One Assistance Dog at a Time
AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. ANITA MIGDAY

How many of us feel absolutely warm inside when we see assistance dogs doing their jobs—helping their owners when their owners are unable to help themselves. When I see my own dog bouncing around the farm, I have a hard time imagining her taking on such an important career...unless someone was looking for the most exciting squirrel chasing adventure available.

I was introduced to Dr. Migday through a mutual colleague. The following interview opens a window into the world of assistance dogs, details what led Dr. Migday to pursue this specialty in her career as a veterinarian, and shares the challenges and rewards involved in bringing a better quality of living to every animal and owner who enters the clinic.—Kelly Soldavin, Editorial Director

Why did you decide to pursue veterinary medicine as a career?
Although I was raised in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan, and Dayton, Ohio, I always dreamed of living on a ranch filled with every imaginable species. My childhood passion for animals morphed into a 30+ year career the day I learned of my acceptance into Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 1976.

You’re a private practice owner—could you discuss your decision to pursue owning a practice? The challenges as well as the rewards?
Upon graduation from veterinary school, I had absolutely no desire to own my own practice. That changed within a year after I began working for someone else! Owning my own practice has given me countless opportunities that far outweigh the daily demands of management and business administration. In addition to general practice, I am able to provide specialty services in canine/feline reproductive medicine.

In addition to being a clinician, you’ve also had the opportunity to work in radio and television. How has that influenced your approach to veterinary care?
Radio and television are great mediums to distribute “information sound bites” that can bring awareness to the many issues that pet owners have with their dog or cat. But nothing can replace the one-on-one storytelling and information gathering that happens in an examination room. The state-of-the-art technology in the media world (TV/radio/websites/blogs/tweets/status updates/texts) may present numerous factoids & generic treatment options, but the state-of-the-heart technology in my office finds a solution that works best for the individual pet & owner.

You provide veterinary services for the National Education for Assistance Dog Services (NEADS, neads.org), which focuses on matching service dogs with deaf or disabled individuals. What about the organization motivated you to become involved with it?
In the mid 1980’s I was shooting a 26-episode series called Cats & Dogs for WGBH-Boston. The executive director of NEADS asked if I would be the speaker for their 10th anniversary dinner. I was inspired by the organization’s dedication to their mission—to provide independence for people who are deaf or disabled through the use of canine assistance—and their ability to make such a difference in so many lives...one assistance dog at a time.

Many questions arise when veterinarians, practice teams, and clients meet an assistance dog and its owner. Merck Animal Health (merck-animal-health.com) has recognized the need to provide veterinary professionals with answers to these questions, producing the pamphlet, Dogs at Work: Ensuring Optimum Care for Canine Assistants, to educate veterinary practices and alert them to the unique needs of an assistance dog team. The pamphlet is available online at todaysveterinarypractice.com and doginfluenza.com/pdfs/INTV-11389-NEADS-clinic-broch-PRT.PDF.
What are the differences in handling and treating assistance dogs versus the typical family pet? How does interaction with owners differ?
The differences in treating an assistance dog team begin as soon as they arrive at the practice. There are many ways you can make their experience more productive and enjoyable (see Tips for Accommodating an Assistance Dog Team at todaysveterinarypractice.com), but the most important thing you can do is listen to the owner and then assess how to proceed with your examination, based on what the team faces in their daily lives.

I can bend over or use my hands and fingers to turn on a light. When we understand the scope of daily functions performed by these dogs, we realize how critical it is to keep them in optimal physical and mental health.

For an organization, such as NEADS, what are the most important necessities, besides financial assistance, required to continue providing services?
The guts of this organization are the passion, wisdom, and power to help others. The power comes not only from financial gifts, but also from donations of products, such as microchips and vaccines (for example, a vaccine to help protect dogs from canine influenza virus) from Merck Animal Health (see Etiquette Handout for the Practice Team), and educational opportunities that build awareness about what we do and why it is so important.

With all these different experiences, is there a particular moment that stands out as one of the most memorable during your career as a veterinary professional?
One of those “memorable moments” began on Thanksgiving Day in 1988 when my mother-in-law came to Boston for a quiet, cozy day of food and family. I promised to only be gone for an hour when I drove to work to do morning treatments. Thanksgiving devolved as Mandy the toy poodle, who was boarding at my hospital, escaped from the exercise pen and disappeared.

That moment of helplessness and frustration continued for 13 weeks and with countless flyers, reward posters, newspaper ads, and car trips around the neighborhood. Mandy was eventually found, went on to recover nicely from her ordeal, and was reunited with her family (who had received a phone call from me—while I chewed Tums—every single day for 13 weeks with an update).

The memorable moment came when Mandy’s owner called 2 months later to make an appointment to board Mandy in my kennel. She was convinced we had to be the safest place in town due to the perseverance, honesty, and commitment demonstrated in the search for Mandy and her recovery and return. And those 3 qualities belong in any business, profit or nonprofit.

Anita Migday, DVM, MS, is the owner and hospital director of Slade Veterinary Hospital, Inc, in Framingham, Massachusetts. Dr. Migday also serves on the board of directors of NEADS in Princeton, Massachusetts, and has provided veterinary services for the organization for over 20 years. She spent 6 years in local broadcast (WVBF 105.7 FM–Boston, WKOX 1200 AM–Framingham, and WCVB Ch. 5–Boston), giving tips as a pet health expert, and hosted the national PBS series, Cats & Dogs in the mid 1980s. The show offered a video encyclopedia of pet care, beginning in the examination room and continuing across the nation in exploration of the human–companion animal bond. Dr. Migday received her DVM from Ohio State University.

What does the staff need to know regarding interaction among assistance dogs, their owners, and other people/pets in the clinic?
An assistance dog is a working dog doing their job…. don’t bother them while they work. Help the dog maintain its personal space and safety by moving the dog and owner into an examination room to avoid barking or excitable dogs and rambunctious children. Always ask the human partner FIRST if it is okay to pat/speak to his or her dog. Don’t hesitate to remind others of this important etiquette.

What educational resources are available to veterinary professionals who are interested in becoming involved with assistance dogs/organizations?
We encourage animal health professionals to visit the NEADS campus so they can learn the most basic tool: awareness. Because many of us do not have a physical disability that limits our mobility or independence, we may have a difficult time putting ourselves into the shoes of the client who visits a veterinarian’s office with an assistance dog. The client is more reliant on the assistance dog than most of us can possibly imagine.

Assistance dogs perform critical tasks for their human partners: they can pick up a dropped set of keys; alert their partner of a knock on the door from a visitor or delivery man; open a refrigerator door to retrieve medications or a beverage; turn on a light in a darkened room… all these things I know I take for granted because...