

# PRESS CONFERENCE

**The concept of  
visiting dogs in  
nursing homes, a  
first of its kind in  
Belgium**

**Friday, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2014**



# HISTORY

**Boris Levinson**, an American child psychiatrist, was the first to use the dog as an adjunct therapy in the course of his consultations.

He noticed the **therapeutic efficacy** the presence of a dog had in patients such as children and seniors.

The animal thus evolved into a **tool** for improving the well-being of vulnerable individuals.

# ANIMAL THERAPY

A therapy which relies on **bringing a domestic animal or a pet into contact with** a human being suffering from mental, physical or social disorders.

The contact **reduces stress** or mitigates the effects of a medical treatment or post-surgical problems.

When it implies dogs, the method is referred to as **canine therapy** or cynotherapy.

The therapy has also been used as a response to problems such as depression, **solitude** and isolation.

# The dog acts as a go-between

Through the warmth of its coat, his affectionate **presence**, or just **physical contact**, it will help the therapist improve the patients' psychological condition.

## THE DOG



In nursing homes, the dog reassures with its **spontaneity** and sincerity, it **comforts**, it facilitates communication with others, it helps people reconnect with life and gives them a goal, it boosts **self-confidence** and fills the void. The dog works towards social reintegration via the encounter with others.

# THE BENEFITS TO MAN

## Short-term positive effects:

- fun,
- relaxation, easing
- comfort, affection
- inducement of interaction and communication

## Long-term impact on the seniors' well-being:

- self-esteem, sensory stimulation, better memory functionality, improvement of motor skills in the various body parts, improved quality of life

**=> Meaningful influence of the animal on health**



# THE “GAI SEJOUR” PROJECT

- What: visiting dogs
- Who: the residents (in view of improving their well-being)
- Where: within our nursing home, in the library, in the garden and then in the chambers (gradual)
- When: 1<sup>st</sup> contact on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2-3 trial sessions, then quarterly 4 sessions
- How : individual and/or group sessions
- Support from the non-profit organisation “Un chien pour un sourire” (10 years of expertise)
- Monitoring of benefits

## How the idea was born

*My function as a Counsellor in charge of Animal Welfare and Seniors led the FCI to get in touch and outline this new concept. I told Ms Vinck, the General Manager of the public social welfare centre (CPAS), about it, and she immediately embraced the concept – this is how the project began.*



# GOALS PURSUED

- **Recollection** process  
Most residents used to have a pet before moving into the “Gai Séjour” nursing home
- **Renewed contacts** with man’s best friend
- Pleasure and **entertainment**
- Short- and long-term **therapeutic** impact  
(soothing, relaxation, etc.)

## WHO ARE THESE VISITING DOGS?

- Family dogs and...
- Owners who wish to bring some joy, warmth and company to those who need it
- Healthy adult dogs with sufficient life experience of different people, places and situations
- Friendly and sociable dogs naturally interested in people
- Dogs of all types, in different sizes and breeds



## WHO DO THEY PAY A VISIT TO?

The elderly, children, the disabled, patients with mental disorders, people in revalidation, the war disabled or people with autism, within various institutions (nursing homes, hospitals, schools, day care centres, health or therapy centres, etc.)



# THE CONCEPT IS UNRIVALLED IN BELGIUM

## Visiting dogs in nursing homes: A first in Belgium

The presence of animals is beneficial to the elderly, but very often, those are not allowed in nursing homes.

The team at the “Gai Séjour” thus launches the project in view of improving the residents’ welfare, building on the expertise of the non-profit organisation “Un chien pour un sourire”

## Cynotherapy in the Citadelle hospital (CHR) in Liège

- The dog has been resorted to for 10 years for its outstanding relational skills
- Paediatric service for hospitalised children
- Improvement of the sick child’s physical and mental health
- The dog’s company relaxes and comforts
- The dog turns into a playmate that accompanies children in their imaginary adventures
- The dog allows children to develop their flexibility and improve their motor function, and boosts their physical and mental recovery

# THE CHR IN LIEGE AS A MODEL

The medical staff described the method as follows:

“...enchanted moments of togetherness between child and dog who cuddle and share secrets under the owner’s watchful gaze.

The reciprocal exchange aims at allowing children to escape all the treatments and examinations they are subjected to.

Stroking and petting the shaggy animal bring the child affection, tenderness and comfort.”

# VISITING DOGS WORLDWIDE

## Visiting dogs in Finland

**The Finnish Kennel Club** continuously broadens the scope of its activities in the field of visiting dogs.

To date, registrations amount to **almost 1,000 visiting dogs** and instructors.

The awareness for their activities is growing, and the demand for visits is flourishing.

The Finnish Kennel Club's visiting dogs are bringing joy **to the life of thousands of people** and are now treated like stars in the media.





# ANOTHER EXAMPLE IN PUERTO RICO



A large group of volunteers, all dog owners, gathers on a regular basis in order to bring **joy and company to hundreds of patients in numerous hospitals, health centres and therapeutic centres** throughout the island.

The incentive was so successful that the Canine Federation of Puerto Rico has been looking to **institutionalise the canine therapy programme** in each and every hospital and senior care centre in the country.

To achieve such a result, the therapeutic dog services in their entirety have been made available to all **municipal governments** in the country.

# PARTNERSHIPS

This project was born from the cooperation of several partners:



- The Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI), headquartered in Thuin (BE)



- The City of Thuin, also known as the World Capital of Dogs



- The nursing home team who give the concept a try with the residents' cooperation



- The non-profit organisation “Un chien pour un sourire”, which will provide us with their expertise

# STORIES

“I like it when they come. That trick with dogs is really great. I truly felt good because at home, I’ve got four dogs in all sizes, from the Chihuahua to the Labrador. Their visiting sick children would be a very good thing, because it boosts them a lot.”

“It was great! We were all very happy in here. It was as if we were having a big party! The dogs would come close and greet us. I felt secure because the dogs were well-trained and obeyed orders. I think this should be developed.”

“They brought us something we had never seen before; that was a very good thing. When you see the dogs for the first time, you’re moved. I like dogs a lot, but I don’t have one, so I was very happy. I think the programme should be extended to other centres.”

“It was amazing! It’s something I had seen on TV, and I find it great, especially for kids and seniors. It’s a real source of entertainment.”

“It was brilliant, very nice. We used to have dogs at home, and my husband even dug a grave for our last bitch, which had died of old age. When the dogs paid us a visit, I felt joyful and soothed.”



# HOW TO BECOME A CANINE VISITOR

Mrs DUTRIEUX, Director General of the communal administration of Thuin, has volunteered together with Keylinn, her Irish Setter (see picture), for a first contact. A call for applications will then be circulated among the municipal employees, citizens and breeders in Thuin, to allow those willing to become canine visitors to apply.

**The visits are made on a volunteer basis;  
the visiting dogs' owners thus receive no compensation.**



# Philippe BLANCHART

## Counsellor in charge of Animal Welfare and Seniors

- First Counsellor in charge of Animal Welfare in Thuin (2006-2009 and since 20/09/2013)
- Coining of the title “Thuin, World Capital of Dogs” together with the FCI (2011)
- Rolling out of various awareness-raising and informative actions/campaigns on animals (sterilisation of stray cats, circuses, contraceptive pigeon houses, dog excrements, dangerous animals, pony carousels, etc.)
- Origination of the “Plan Maya”, a project aimed at protecting bees (2011)
- In Parliament, various speeches about animal welfare

*“Most actions (save the pigeon houses) require budget resources we do not have, but we’re definitely devoted to making animals an inherent part of the management of our city.”*



**How have dogs come into your life, and what breed was your first dog?**

*My grand-parents already had dogs I was really fond of. The dog is an animal with which, as a child, I was able to communicate and build a relationship of trust. My first dog was an Irish Setter named Sky, I must have been 10 at the time. Today, I own a Saluki.*

**What does your four-legged friend bring to you?**

*There's some kind of undefinable telepathic communion which adds up to the emotional side of things and to a mutual sharing through games and walks, among other things.*

**What is your favourite breed, and why?**

*I don't favour a breed in particular. I generally like hunting dogs for their expression and energy.*





**The method: sweet and unique as a dog!**

**The dog: so much more than just a faithful companion!**

**The residents: dogs' best friends!**

**THANK YOU FOR  
YOUR ATTENTION**