

Workshop Epilepsy and Seizure Dogs - May 2010– A report

Worldwide, some 50 million people suffer from epilepsy. In Belgium, that comes down to a rate of 1 in 150, 70% to 80% of whom is seizure-free, thanks to adequate medication. Half of the epileptic patients sense an oncoming seizure in advance, and are thus (sometimes) able to ask for help or make sure they will be more or less safe during the episode. Unfortunately, the other half is not, thus being at risk at any given time.

Seizure dogs – probably the least known type of assistance dogs – are especially educated for the benefit of people suffering from epilepsy. They make their handlers leave their homes from time to time to go for a soothing walk together, thus making sure that the both of them get enough exercise. As any other assistance dog does, the seizure dog favours social contacts: people stop to talk easier, if only about the dog. They are often a source of humour, and turn out to be a true companion, offering the necessary emotional support.

Epilepsy is still greatly taboo, and patients often feel shame at having seizures. That is where the seizure dog comes in. The dog's presence indicates the handler suffers from epilepsy, and inside the dog's harness there is a little informative note for people passing by.

Most seizure dogs learn to start barking when their handlers are experiencing a seizure. The barking sound not only alerts other people, it is also recognizable for the handlers returning to their senses. At that moment, the dog's presence is often reassuring. Some dogs learn how to fetch help or push an alarm button. Such a **seizure response dog** can also get the handlers mobile phone or fetch the necessary medication. Hachiko also trains them in "street work", so that they can prevent their handlers from crossing the street when being not alert enough, keep them away from chasms or flows,...

When handler and dog bond closely, some dogs start predicting seizures, thus being called "**seizure alert dogs**". Such dogs give a signal the handlers can recognise, so that they have time to take the necessary precautions. At the start of a dog's training, it is not clear whether the dog will have that ability in the future.

Hachiko pioneers in seizure dog training, and gets requests for help from patients all over Belgium and abroad. Taken into account the need for intensive, individual training and guidance, it is impossible for them to respond to all of these requests. That is why they invited dog trainers and epileptics to an international congress on seizure dogs on May 20 and 21, 2010. Their colleagues from Stichting Hulphond Nederland (The Netherlands) also shared their experiences. Thanks to the support of the pharmaceutical company [UCB](#), Hachiko was able to invite the most renowned American experts from [Canine Assistants](#). They represent one of the most important organisations for seizure dog training in the entire world.

Participants from The Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Chechnya, Norway, Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom came to Gent (Belgium) to share experiences and attend workshops on different themes, such as: attribution criteria for seizure dogs, selection criteria for dogs eligible for seizure dog training, the skills seizure dogs need to acquire,... Two of Hachiko's clients testified to how their seizure dog changed their life.

The congress turned out to be very instructive for all of those present.