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Occlusion of Vision in Old English Sheepdogs

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with dogs (which require more care, especially daily walks) lived on. In fact, the species of companion animal owned was found to have virtually no bearing on the 1-year survival data.

The scientific rigor necessary to arrive at a judgment on the effectiveness of animals in therapy is relatively easy to achieve, with a little thought. A far more difficult issue is how an animal being employed as a therapist ought to be treated, especially in light of the incredible range of conditions and environments that animals will probably be working in at some time in the near future.

As Michael Fox noted in the last issue of the *Journal* (3(4):267, 1982), our choice of language about animals both reflects and conditions the way we think about them. He discussed our desensitization to the plight of confinement farm animals through use of the phrase "production units," and of lab animals by the impersonal term "specimens." It is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the same insensitivity to animals' needs emerges from the literature on animal-facilitated therapy. A paper by Leo Bustad and Linda Hines (*Cal Vet* 36(8):37-44), in particular, speaks of companion animals as "prescription pets," and then cites another article by Samuel and Elizabeth

Corson in which animals are reduced to the psychobabble of "bonding catalysts." Pets, claim Bustad and Hines, can provide the elderly with someone to "lord it over." McCulloch views visiting companion animals as "entertainers" for those who are forced to waste away their hours in places like hospitals.

It does seem, then, that some of the aspects of animal-facilitated therapy need a bit of careful reconsideration before we begin to gush euphorically over its potential. First, we need better-controlled studies on the outcomes of treatments that employ animals. Next, we need some reasonably specific guidelines on the care and welfare of the animals so used. At a minimum, we can say that these animals should never be treated as "living library books," rented out on a short-term basis in a way that is probably confusing to the animals, to people who may mistreat them or, perhaps worse, may come to love their animal-guests too much, only to lose them at the end of an evening. And finally, we had best take a closer look at a society that exiles its old people to human warehouses, where they are left to exist without activity or purpose, so that animals, once again, are compelled to assume the tasks that we would simply prefer to avoid.

Occlusion of Vision in Old English Sheepdogs

Michael W. Fox

The show standards established for many breeds of dogs have been linked with a number of genetically related abnormalities that can result in unnecessary suffering. The facial skin folds and shortened face of bulldogs, which respectively lead to chronic dermatitis and respiratory difficulties, are two dramatic examples. Likewise, ear-cropping is an ethical-

ly questionable mutilation that conveys no benefit upon the dog. Another serious welfare concern relates to a practice that is common among owners of Old English sheepdogs and other breeds with long facial hair: allowing the hair to cover the animal's eyes. This feature is considered a desirable show point. It is additionally justified by the widespread belief

that it is necessary to keep the hair over the dog's eyes in order to protect them from sunlight. In fact, when the hair is lifted up to expose the eyes to daylight, a photophobic reaction (blinking, lacrimation, etc.) does occur, which leads the owner to the erroneous conclusion that the eyes actually need to be left covered. However, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that an animal whose eyes are almost totally obscured from any contact with daylight will show photophobia when the eyes are exposed. This is no reason for keeping an animal's eyes permanently covered. Furthermore, the eyes, since they are continually being irritated by hair, are likely to develop chronic conjunctivitis, which may in turn lead to corneal ulceration and other ophthalmic problems.

Many owners of Old English sheepdogs and other breeds with long facial hair believe that, since the hair covers the dog's eyes, it must be "natural" or

serve some beneficial purpose that was deliberately introduced as a trait through selective breeding. Such myths need to be dispelled for the health and welfare of these breeds. Instead, owners are advised to either trim the hair away from their dog's eyes or tie it up on top of the animal's head with a ribbon or elastic band.

Dogs entered in shows with facial hair deliberately groomed over the eyes should be excluded from competition, since this show standard, in and out of the ring, places the animal's welfare in jeopardy. There is also evidence of dramatic temperament changes in sheepdogs whose visual occlusion has been corrected by cutting the hair away from their eyes; shy, timid, and unpredictable dogs suddenly become tractable, responsive and, emotionally stable companions. Little wonder.