

Opening Our Eyes to Guide Dogs for the Blind in Singapore

Dear Editor,

The concept of the modern guide dog first began in Germany after World War I in an effort to support veterans blinded in combat. In 1927, Dorothy Eustis, having gained inspiration from her visit to a guide dog school in Potsdam, Germany, introduced guide dogs into the United States of America (USA). She brought hope to many blind people by introducing the guide dog as a means of rehabilitation, enabling blind people to regain their independence. Her article titled "The Seeing Eye" in the Saturday Evening Post sparked great interest across the USA and was the catalyst for the start of the guide dog movement.¹ Since then, guide dog movements have been established in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada and many other countries.

Currently, many blind people rely on white canes for mobility. The use of the white cane enables them to detect potential obstacles, while guide dogs are trained to avoid obstacles, even overhead obstacles that a white cane would fail to detect. This added advantage provides the user with a greater sense of security and increased independence.² Such an assurance also increases the user's speed of locomotion.³ Guide dogs are also trained in the concept of "intelligent disobedience", which teaches the dogs to disobey their owners in the event of potential danger; for example, when crossing a road.

Among developed countries, Singapore has been relatively slow in adopting the use of guide dogs for visual rehabilitation. One of us (CHK) brought a guide dog into Singapore from Australia in 1982. However, due to the lack of public support and facilities, the dog had to be returned to the organisation.⁴

In 2005, CHK brought another guide dog, donated by the Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) organisation in USA, into Singapore with the hope of integrating guide dogs into modern Singapore society. Since then, changes in legislation have permitted for the entry of guide dogs into public establishments, buses and rapid transit systems in Singapore.⁵ In addition, approval can be sought to allow users to keep their guide dogs in public housing estates.

However, such changes in legislation need to be accompanied by a change in cultural attitudes and the clearing of misconceptions among Singaporeans. Despite government support, many of those working in the service industry are unaware of these laws and try to deny entry to guide dogs. This poses a dilemma for the blind person who is compelled to stand up for his or her lawful rights.

This situation is familiar to CHK. On many occasions when he has attempted to board the bus or enter a restaurant, he has been denied access because of his guide dog. This is a problem-area because public transport (excluding MRT) and food-outlets may still pose difficulties especially when front-line staff are not well-informed of such a provision in the Public Health Act. Ignorance of such laws and policies governing the use of guide dogs is not uncommon. Although the situation is usually resolved through clarification of company policies, such disruption creates much hassle for the guide dog user.

Similar incidents have also occurred elsewhere, such as in the UK. A survey in the UK in 2004 revealed that 52% of guide dog users had been refused entry to a service in the last 5 years and 12% of businesses stated that they did not clearly understand their legal obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act, which makes it illegal for service providers to deny service to guide dog users.⁶ In an attempt to clarify this misconception, the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (UK) launched the "Open Your Doors" campaign to highlight the obligations of people working in the service industry.⁷ Public service announcement campaigns have also been launched in the USA.⁸

Certain organisations in Singapore have taken laudable steps towards providing service for guide dog users. Singapore Airlines now allows the free passage of guide dogs accompanying their users. In recognition of their sterling efforts to provide impeccable service to guide dog users, Singapore Airlines received a 'Golden Ribbon' award from the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (UK) when they launched their "Open Your Doors" campaign.^{9,10} In a similar move, Alexandra Hospital became the first hospital in Singapore to allow the use of guide dogs on their premises.¹¹

In multi-racial Singapore, guide dogs face an additional issue of religious sensitivity. In Islam, the saliva of dogs is considered to be "unclean". Though permissible, Muslims are therefore not encouraged to keep dogs as pets. Nonetheless, they are allowed to keep dogs for hunting or guarding their property.¹² This has resulted in some Muslim taxi drivers and shop owners in some countries refusing services to guide dog users. In a move to tackle this problem, the Shariat Council in the UK published a statement citing that this ban did not apply to guide dogs and that Muslims are bound by Syariah law to render aid to the visually handicapped.¹³

The advantage of the use of guide dogs over a white cane

is overwhelmingly clear. The introduction of guide dogs into Singapore would greatly contribute to enabling the blind to live as much of a life of normalcy as possible. Societal attitudes need to be changed, and the solution lies in nothing less than the introduction of legislation and policy guidelines advocating the use of guide dogs.

Nonetheless, guide dogs are not suitable for all who are visually impaired. A visually impaired person must first be assessed to ensure that a guide dog is the best mode of mobility suited to their lifestyle. In addition to this, the user must go through a rigorous training programme to acquire the skills necessary in caring for the dog, as well as to allow both the guide dog and user to develop a safe working relationship in different environments. For instance, a guide dog to be brought to the workplace may require initial visits to allow the dog to adjust to its new surroundings. Accommodation of a guide dog in the workplace should also be duly discussed with the employer, and colleagues made aware of guide dog etiquette.

Campaigns can be launched to increase awareness among the public to allay their fears while at the same time educating them of the advantages of the use of guide dogs. To this end, the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind Limited (GDAB) was recently registered in Singapore as a non-profit organisation by a group of volunteers, since the Singapore Parliament's acceptance of the use of Guide Dogs in Singapore on 19th September 2005. Like other guide dog associations throughout the world, GDAB is dedicated to raising funds for the visually impaired to own and use guide dogs, as well as increasing the awareness of guide dogs in the community.

One way to help dispel misconstrued beliefs about guide dogs is to educate the public about guide dog etiquette (Table 1).¹⁴ This would not only aid public acceptance, but also provide a safer environment for the guide dogs and their handlers.

Although there is currently only one guide dog in Singapore, it is hoped that her presence here will help to usher in greater change in societal attitudes, challenge public misconceptions, initiate the introduction of new legislation and establish a guide dog training programme in Singapore.¹⁵ This is in line with the sentiment of Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who has often reiterated his desire for Singapore to become the most disabled friendly city in Asia.^{16,17} The introduction of guide dog use in Singapore will draw us one step closer towards such a goal.

REFERENCES

1. Eustis DH. The seeing eye. *Saturday Evening Post* 1927 Nov 5; 200: 42-46.
2. Bonneau LJ. Compensating for sight loss with a guide dog. *Insight* 2000;25:125-7.
3. Zabihaylo C, Couturier JA, Termoz N, Prince F. Analysing the postural and gait behaviour of a person with retinitis pigmentosa traveling with a guide dog. *International Congress Series 1282. Vision 2005 – Proceedings of the International Congress*, April 2005, London, UK. doi:10.1016/j.ics.2005.05.037.
4. *Blind World Magazine*. Singapore. Restaurants are now free to allow guide dogs in. *Today Online Singapore*. October 30 2005. Available at: <http://www.home.earthlink.net/~blindworld/NEWS/5-10-30-04.htm>. Accessed 22 May 2007.
5. National Environment Agency Environmental Public Health Act (Chapter 95, Section 11) 1 June 1993.

Table 1. Dos and Don'ts of Guide Dog Etiquette

Dos	Don'ts
• Do allow the dog to concentrate and perform for the safety of its handler.	• Don't touch, pet or feed a guide dog while it is wearing its working harness.
• Do understand that, for safety reasons, some blind or visually impaired people may not reveal their guide dog's name.	• Don't call the dog by its name.
• Do allow the handler to give the dog commands.	• Don't give the dog commands.
• Do assist the handler upon his or her request, and always ask before you attempt to help.	• Don't try to take control in situations unfamiliar to the dog or its handler.
• Do walk on the handler's right side, several paces behind him or her.	• Don't walk on the dog's left side as it may become distracted or confused.
• Do ask if the handler needs your assistance, and if so, offer your left arm.	• Don't attempt to grab or steer the handler while the dog is guiding him or her, and don't attempt to hold the dog's harness.
• Do allow it to rest undisturbed and concentrate on its job.	• Don't allow children to tease or abuse the dog.
• Do allow them to meet when all animals can be carefully supervised.	• Don't allow other pets to challenge or intimidate a guide dog.
• Do stroke the dog on the shoulder area – but only with its handler's approval.	• Don't pat the dog on the head.

6. Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. Open your doors survey: Key Results. Available at: <http://www.gdba.org.uk/index.php?id=2042>. Accessed 22 May 2007.
7. Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. Open your doors guide. Available at: <http://www.gdba.org.uk/index.php?id=1985>. Accessed 22 May 2007.
8. The Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind's Public Service Announcement. Available at: <http://www.guidedog.org/pubedu/PSA/psa.htm>. Accessed 8 May 2007.
9. Singapore Airlines General Conditions of Carriage for Passengers and Baggage. Available at: http://www.singaporeair.com/saa/en_UK/content/general/legal/carriage.jsp. Accessed 22 May 2007.
10. Guide Dogs for the Blind National News. Singapore Airlines wins service excellence award. 2 June 2006. Available at: [http://www.gdba.org.uk/index.php?id=12&tx_ttnews\[pointer\]=4&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=654&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=22&cHash=7d626869bc](http://www.gdba.org.uk/index.php?id=12&tx_ttnews[pointer]=4&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=654&tx_ttnews[backPid]=22&cHash=7d626869bc). Accessed 22 May 2007.
11. Alexandra Hospital. NHG Institutions and Services. Available at: http://www.nhg.com.sg/nhg_04_AH.asp. Accessed 22 May 2007.
12. Al-Amin H. The love of animals. Islamonline.net. Available at: <http://www.islamonline.net/english/introducingislam/Environment/article04.shtml>. Accessed 30 May 2007.
13. Disability Rights Commission. No ban on guide dogs under Islamic law. Available at: http://www.drc.org.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2002/no_ban_on_guide_dogs_under_isl.aspx. Accessed 8 May 2007.
14. Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, Inc. Etiquette and Guide Dogs. Available at: <http://www.guidedog.org/Progserv/guidelsphb.htm>. Accessed 22 May 2007.
15. Williams L. Guide dog training provides lesson in love. SignonSanDiego.com News May 26 2006. Available at: <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/northcounty/guestcolumns/20060530-9999-m1m26cscoop.html>. Accessed 8 May 2007.
16. Professor Tommy Koh. Employing the disabled in Singapore speech. Talking points for the launch of the Disability Awareness Public Education (DAPE) Campaign, At Lunch, Organised by the Asian Women's Welfare Association (AWWA), 1 December 2006.
17. Professor Tommy Koh. "Let us make Singapore the most disabled friendly city in the whole of Asia." Reflections on the book "I am human, not alien." Social Service Journal (a publication of NCSS & SSTI) May 2006;16:13-14.

Deborah HL Ng,^{1,2} Rebecca YK Chew,^{1,3,4} *DipOptom, BScOptom, MScClinOptom*, Francis Seow-Choen,^{4,5} *MBBS, FRCSEd, FAMS*, Cheng-Hock Kua,⁴ Kah-Guan Au Eong,^{1,3,4,6-9} *MMed(Ophth), FRCS, FAMS*

¹ Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Alexandra Hospital, Singapore

² Ninewells Hospital and Medical School, University of Dundee, United Kingdom

³ The Eye Clinic, Jurong Medical Centre, Singapore

⁴ Guide Dogs Association of the Blind, Limited, Singapore

⁵ Colorectal Centre, Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, Singapore

⁶ Department of Ophthalmology, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, Singapore

⁷ Singapore Eye Research Institute, Singapore

⁸ Department of Ophthalmology, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Singapore

⁹ Singapore International Eye Cataract Retina Centre, Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Rebecca YK Chew, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Alexandra Hospital, 378 Alexandra Road, Singapore 159964.

Email: rebecca_chew@alexhosp.com.sg