

Heading North to Help Save Lives

WHS SENDS VETERINARY TEAMS TO NORTHERN COMMUNITIES

By Alix Sobler

It's a familiar sight among many Northern communities in Manitoba; groups of collarless dogs wandering around town, scavenging through discarded trash, looking around for a warm place to sleep. Until recently, these stray, skinny, often sick and injured dogs were left to fend for themselves, until they succumbed to the elements, were killed by other animals, or had the bad luck of being caught outside on a "dog shoot day". Now, thanks in part to the efforts of The Winnipeg Humane Society's mobile spay, neuter, and vaccination clinics, prospects for at least some of these animals are looking brighter.

For more than four years The Winnipeg Humane Society has been sending veterinarians and veterinary technicians to small communities around the province to set up short term spay, neuter and vaccination clinics. These "M*A*S*H" style operations are thrown together in school classrooms and community centres and run over a 2 to 3 day period. "The response has been good over all," says Dr. Erika Anseeuw, Director of Animal Health at The Winnipeg Humane Society. "Once we've been there a few times

people know who we are, and they get really excited about us coming." The trips are short, but the doctors and staff pack them full, performing approximately 15 surgeries and conducting about 20 appointments for vaccinations and check ups. "It's great for the community," Dr. Anseeuw says. "We want kids to grow up with a good relationship with animals, to develop a bond."

The Winnipeg Humane Society's mobile clinics might be more important to the development of that bond than one might imagine. The number of stray dogs wandering around these areas contributes to the high number of dog bites and vicious attacks, and the victims are often children. In addition, the problem of stray dogs rooting through the garbage and spreading disease is undeniable in these communities and until recently, the "dog shoot days" were one of the few solutions. People are told to keep their pets inside on those days, and any loose dogs are shot on sight. Dog lovers are shocked at this prospect but the people of these somewhat isolated communities are left with little choice. "There are no vets and not a lot of money in these communities," Dr. Anseeuw explains. "In order to have an animal sterilized, people would have to



drive three hours, stay overnight, drive back and pay for the surgery. It's not a possibility for many pet owners."

"Getting communities involved in the process is of the utmost importance to the clinic's success," according to Dr. Glen Sinclair, a veterinarian at The Winnipeg Humane Society who also goes on these trips. Dr. Sinclair has been to both Cross Lake and Churchill in recent years and is hoping to visit Norway House soon. "We always have to establish contacts within the community for it to work," he says. "Then those people will go out and convince their friends and neighbors to bring in their animals." According to Dr. Sinclair, word of mouth seems to be the best marketing tool. "Every time we go it gets busier and busier." Every once in a while Dr. Sinclair will even let some of the local kids look in on a surgery. "They think it's 'way cool.'"

The Winnipeg Humane Society's mobile spay, neuter, and vaccination clinics are just one part of the solution to the stray and feral animal problems in these communities. The Winnipeg Humane Society is also taking in as many dogs and puppies as the shelter can handle. These dogs are often driven or flown into Winnipeg by members of these communities who travel for hours at their own expense out of the goodness of their hearts. But it will take more than generous people to make a lasting difference. "Ideally we would like to work with government municipalities," says Dr. Sinclair. "Maybe set up a direct subsidy program where people can sponsor animals to be spayed or neutered." And Dr. Erika Anseeuw insists that an integrated approach is the only way to minimize the problem significantly. "Sterilization, shelters and licensing programs are important," she says. "But these clinics are a good start."

