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VHUP Clinician Serves at Ground Zero

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At 1:00 PM on September 11, **Dr. Cynthia Otto**, associate professor of emergency and critical care medicine at VHUP, stopped her hospital routine and became a government employee for nine days. Dr. Otto, a member of the Pennsylvania Task Force 1, one of 28 Urban Search and Rescue Teams in the nation, was “activated” to be deployed to the destroyed World Trade Center complex in New York.

The team of 62 people is trained to deploy in six hours, self sustain for 72 hours, and operate 24 hours a day. The team and the dogs are specifically trained for search and rescue after a building collapse. Teams were established by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to be deployed after natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes. The Pennsylvania Task Force has been in existence for eight years and was first deployed during Hurricane Floyd. A team is made up of search and rescue, medical, technical and logistics personnel. There is no official team position for a veterinarian, but the experience in New York shows how necessary a veterinarian is at a disaster site. The team includes four highly trained search dogs and their handlers, firefighters specially trained for rescue, paramedics and physicians.

“After a delay at the Lincoln Tunnel for a bomb scare, the team arrived at the base of operations, the Javits Center, about midnight,” said Dr. Otto. “We unloaded our two semi-trailers of gear and equipment and set up an impromptu home. By 3 AM we were ready to

go to work.”

Teams at disaster sites are put under the command of the local authorities. Here it was the New York Fire Department. The team was divided into two work groups, the day shift and the night shift. Dr. Otto became part of the night shift because it was decided that local veterinary care would be harder to obtain during the night. Two dogs, Logan, a German shepherd, and Bear, a Labrador retriever, were on the shift. The team had a forward base of operations in the Merrill Lynch Fitness Center at Ground Zero. The space had been damaged, but it was functional. The base was in close proximity to that of the New Jersey team, so Dr. Otto kept an eye on their dogs and other dogs that were in need of care.

“What was a typical night at Ground Zero?” said Dr. Otto. “The night shift would load up on buses or military vehicles for the trip to Ground Zero. The streets were lined with New Yorkers cheering on the workers. It was a powerful way to start a shift. The busiest component of the team was the search component, the dogs and also technical search (using specialized search cameras and listening devices). The dogs would be sent out to the “pile” with the handler. They would search areas of rubble looking for live victims. Although they are trained for “live find,” it soon became evident that the dogs were also able to identify remains of victims.”



A quick nap



Dr. Otto examining a dog in distress

The conditions under which dogs and people worked were dangerous. They had to maneuver on a huge pile of building debris, where gigantic steel beams rested precariously, one on top of the other. They had to watch their footing and be prepared for sudden holes. There was smoke, noise of huge cranes and hauling equipment, dust, and a great variety of odors. Everything was bathed in incredibly bright light from the many high-powered lights on the site. The humans wore masks and protective shoes and clothing. The dogs could not have masks nor could they work in booties — thousands of which had been donated by a well-meaning public — because they needed to feel the terrain with their feet to avoid accidents.

The dogs were constantly called to search and this contributed to dehydration and exhaustion. “I gave a lot of fluids, subcutaneous and IV,” said Dr. Otto. “We tried to rest the



Taking a break with one of the dogs

dogs as much as possible and get them to drink water. These are very intense dogs, they are driven and will work until they drop. So dehydration was a big danger. The other dangers were the dust and the noxious fumes. I rinsed their eyes every 30-45 minutes. Their feet too were washed at that time to flush away the fine dust. I bandaged wounds and treated minor cuts on site. More serious problems were treated by the Suffolk County, N.Y., SPCA van that was used by the Veterinary Medical Assistance Team (VMAT), located about five blocks from Ground Zero.”

The VMAT team is one of four that exist in the nation, these teams are based in Massachusetts, Maryland, North Carolina and California. They are made up of 15 to 20 veterinary personnel. The team also provided a decontamination facility where the dogs were bathed at the end of each shift to remove the dust and debris from their coats.

Dr. Otto said that the rare critical animal was evacuated to the Animal Medical Center, New York City. She said that “Despite all of the risks, the dogs had minimal problems. The biggest problem seen was dehydration, probably a result of overwork. Cut pads were remarkably infrequent despite the sharp debris. The dogs were tired and because they were not finding live victims, they did not have opportunity to play, their normal reward for a find.”

To keep the dogs’ spirits up, the team organized searches in a near-by park. A person would hide and the dog would find it. Then it was playtime. “Many people volunteered to hide,” said Dr. Otto. “It gave them a release and it helped the dogs. The

dogs also became therapists to the many people who worked at Ground Zero. They were petted and talked to, they momentarily distracted people from the horrendous scene. The need for this interaction led to therapy dogs being brought to Ground Zero to interact with the rescue personnel.”

The night shift ended around 8:30 AM when the team was transported back to Javits Center for rest. The dogs went to sleep pretty easily, but the humans did not. They were camped out on the floor, in sleeping bags — it was light, noisy and busy. “We got about three to four hours of sleep each day before we started our shift again,” said Dr. Otto.

The tour of duty ended on September 19th when the Pennsylvania team was relieved by a team from Texas. “It was a hard time, but a powerful time,” said Dr. Otto. “The swell of support from the citizens of New York and the entire

country was incredible. Daily we would receive emails of support, letters from children and encouragement from strangers. The Spirit of America has risen and will not be beaten down.”

There were approximately 350 dogs in Manhattan working at Ground Zero. They made around 900 visits to the mobile VMAT clinic. Some of these dogs belonged to the 21 Urban Search and Rescue Teams deployed there. Five such teams were deployed to the Pentagon site. Dr. Otto observed the conditions at the site first hand and worked in the dust, smoke, and air full of noxious odors coming from a myriad of burning chemicals and substances. The long term effect of such exposure remains to be seen. Dr. Otto has designed a three-year study to follow the dogs who worked at Ground Zero to determine whether the exposure at the site will affect the dogs’ health in the long term. The study will be funded by the American Kennel Club, the AKC Canine Health Foundation, Ralston Purina, and Veterinary Pet Insurance.

These dogs, in addition to their work right after the disaster, may contribute in the future in their role as sentinels for health problems that may be encountered later by the firemen, policemen, the rescue personnel, and the construction workers who worked at the site from the beginning. One can only hope that the effects will be minor and not long term. The study may provide answers in three to four years.



Decontamination