

**Dx: Post-Polio Syndrome****Rx: One Assistance Dog, Individualized for the Owner**

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Being revisited by the late effects of polio later in life can be an isolating experience. What could a dog provide for this situation? Perhaps a better question would be, what couldn't a dog provide?



Mary Lee Nitschke

**Assistance**

The most obvious function of a dog for someone who had polio is to help with physical tasks that require strength — pushing a manual wheelchair, opening doors or assisting mobile folks with walking or balancing. Dogs are also handy at fetching, getting a snack from the refrigerator on cue, picking up a dropped walking cane or keys, and fetching a person from another room in the house.

Most trained domestic dogs delight in the task of “go find,” especially when it is for one of their people. The dog may perform it even more enthusiastically if the person they find happens to have a piece of kibble as a reward upon being “found.” To reinforce this important service task, we play this game daily in my household.

The tasks that a dog can perform for a person with limited mobility, strength or balance issues are primarily limited by the creative imagination and training skills of the dog and owner team. Many service dogs have created new job descriptions on their own as they have more experience with their partner's needs in daily living.

Research shows that their role goes beyond that of a living prosthesis.

The bond and comfort from having a dog at your side is almost beyond description. Service dogs provide important social functions in “normalizing” perceptions of the person partnered with the dog. Is there a better welcome in the world than a smile and a wagging tail from a trusted dog?

Partnering with a dog also reduces a person's sense of vulnerability and increases his/her sense of efficacy. The focus is on a “can do” statement rather than one of “what I can't do.”

**Which dog?**

The answer to the question of which breed or type of dog is best at this partnership is both simple and not simple. Much depends on the type of assistance the person requires of the dog. A tall man with balance and stability issues with some foot neuropathy, and wanting to walk, will require a dog of sufficient height and length of stride.

Other than physical determinants, there is no one breed or mix or size or temperament of dog that does this work best.

The number one criterion when I help a client select a dog is stability

continued, page 3

## Fourth Research Award Recipient Submits Interim Report

Rahnuma Wahid, Microbiology and Immunology Department, University for Medical Sciences, Little Rock, Arkansas, is the primary investigator for “Regulatory T cells as a biomarker of post-polio syndrome,” a study funded by PHI’s Research Fund. The goal is to determine in a case-matched study whether there is evidence that regulatory T cells are a biomarker of post-polio syndrome or a potential marker of a history of poliomyelitis.

Researchers report the recruitment of nine healthy vaccinated subjects, nine subjects with documented post-polio syndrome and two stable polio survivors. Preliminary data have been collected from the donor samples of the individuals with post-polio syndrome. The results will be compared to samples from stable polio survivors. The low number of stable polio survivors raises a concern, and the group is collaborating with Dr. Raymond Roos at the University of Chicago, in recruiting stable polio survivors.

If you are a polio survivor living in Arkansas or in the Chicago area, who does not have post-polio syndrome, please contact Dr. Wahid at [rwahid@uams.edu](mailto:rwahid@uams.edu) or call 501-686-5317. ▲

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continued from page 1

of disposition. The second is responsiveness to human cues. I have worked with dogs ranging from teacup poodles to mastiff types and almost everything in between. The teacup poodle essentially lived in the lap of her partner who used a wheelchair. She provided dropped key retrieval, constant companionship, boundless loving kisses, as well as a connection with the outside world.

#### Training

The most important aspect of training is the development of a common language and communication system for the owner and the dog. A service dog ideally is responsive to people, able to ignore other animals, trainable, able to remain focused on the human partner, and stable on task when required. Basic house manners are required for every service dog.

I advocate for people to train their own service dog on a daily basis. Constant training empowers both the owner and the dog to learn new skills together as needs change over time. I believe that positive dog-friendly training is the most powerful investment one can make.

#### Where to Find Help

- Look for a CPDT (Certified Pet Dog Trainer) in your zip code at [www.APDT.com](http://www.APDT.com) or 800-PET-DOGS.
- Specialized task regimens may require more intricate training with a professional who works directly with assistance/service dogs. To find resources at this level, go to [www.certifiedanimalbehaviorist.com](http://www.certifiedanimalbehaviorist.com).
- Other useful resources are [www.clickertraining.com](http://www.clickertraining.com), [www.dogwise.com](http://www.dogwise.com) and [www.IAADP.com](http://www.IAADP.com). ▲

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