

**d**o you know what a guide dog is? A guide dog is a service animal trained to provide assistance to an individual with visual impairment. In many Western developed countries, it is not uncommon to see blind travellers moving independently on their own with guide dogs. However, this is a rare sight in Singapore. This is despite the fact that the parliament accepted the use of guide dogs in Singapore on 19 September 2005. The law currently states that guide dogs are allowed to accompany their handlers anywhere open to the general public such as in restaurants, on public transport and in any other public place.

### Guide Dogs Association of the Blind

To promote the use of guide dogs in Singapore, the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind (GDAB) was recently established. The association aims to help the visually impaired undergo training in orientation and mobility so that they are well prepared to travel independently with guide dogs before owning them. Raising public awareness about guide dog use is also an important aim of the association so that guide dogs and their blind travellers can better integrate into the community.

### First guide dog user

Mr Kua Cheng Hock, who was born blind, is the first guide dog user in Singapore. His desire to own a guide dog sparked off at a young age when he read about guide dogs in the 1970s. In 1982, Mr Kua started using his first guide dog for a year in Melbourne where he furthered his studies in special education to teach the blind.

Presently, Mr Kua owns the only guide dog in Singapore, Kendra, which is his second guide dog. One of the founding directors of GDAB, Mr Kua helped formed the association because he feels that more can be done to increase the independence of the blind.

# Dogs with a mission

Guide dogs for the blind By Quah Hui Min

### Advantages of having guide dogs

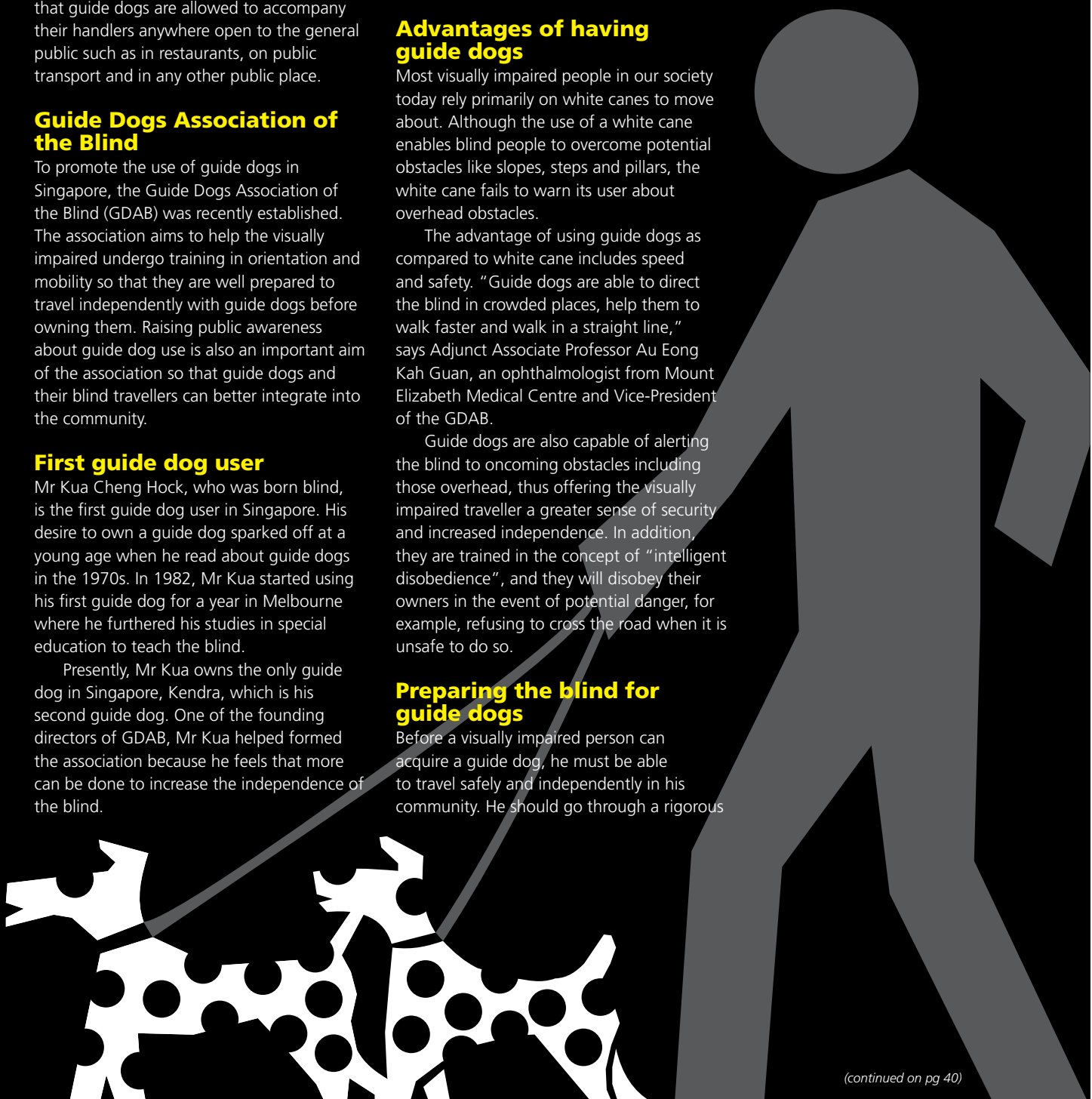
Most visually impaired people in our society today rely primarily on white canes to move about. Although the use of a white cane enables blind people to overcome potential obstacles like slopes, steps and pillars, the white cane fails to warn its user about overhead obstacles.

The advantage of using guide dogs as compared to white cane includes speed and safety. "Guide dogs are able to direct the blind in crowded places, help them to walk faster and walk in a straight line," says Adjunct Associate Professor Au Eong Kah Guan, an ophthalmologist from Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre and Vice-President of the GDAB.

Guide dogs are also capable of alerting the blind to oncoming obstacles including those overhead, thus offering the visually impaired traveller a greater sense of security and increased independence. In addition, they are trained in the concept of "intelligent disobedience", and they will disobey their owners in the event of potential danger, for example, refusing to cross the road when it is unsafe to do so.

### Preparing the blind for guide dogs

Before a visually impaired person can acquire a guide dog, he must be able to travel safely and independently in his community. He should go through a rigorous



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Orientation and mobility specialist Ms Jamie Adams (right) guiding Ms Lim Lee Lee, a visually handicapped to travel on her own.



Volunteers at "Dogs Day Out in the Park" at West Coast Park in June 2009 helping to raise funds for the association.



Mr Kua and Kendra raising awareness on guide dogs among youths at Butter Factory in July 2009 at the Clubbing for Cause event.

training programme better known as the orientation and mobility (O & M) programme.

Ms Jamie Adams, an O & M specialist from the United States, was recently engaged by the GDAB to arm visually impaired travellers with the necessary skills to be independently mobile. Skills like street crossing, taking public transportation and using their remaining senses to travel safely is essential to developing a safe working relationship with a guide dog.

### Misconceptions of the public

"Because we do not come across visually impaired people very often, I believe that although many people are willing to help, they are not always aware of the best way to do so," says Ms Adams, who has been impressed by Singaporeans' willingness to assist the visually impaired travellers that she has been working with. "The public must realise that the blind traveller does not necessarily need assistance," she adds. The first step in assisting a blind person is to ask him if he needs assistance. It can be very startling for a blind person if he is grabbed suddenly without being warned beforehand.

"Many people often mistake guide dogs as pets," says Dr Francis Seow-Choen, President of the GDAB. Guide dogs are in fact service animals that help to protect the well being of their owners. Unlike pets, they are well trained and do not pose a safety threat to the health and safety of others and should not be excluded from public places.

### Future work

As part of its awareness programme, the GDAB aims to approach retailers in the community and give out stickers that read, 'Guide dogs are welcome'. "We hope that such an attractive sign at the shop front will help to raise awareness to the customers and staff that guide dogs are allowed," says Mr Kua. The association hopes that guide dogs will go a long way to making a difference to the lives of the visually impaired in Singapore. ♥

*Quah Hui Min is an optometrist of the Singapore International Eye Cataract Retina Centre at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.*

## Guide dog etiquette

DO'S ✓	DON'TS ✗
Allow the dog to concentrate on its work for the safety of its handler.	Don't touch, pet or feed a guide dog while it is wearing its working harness.
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.
Allow the handler to give the dog commands.	Don't give the dog commands.
Assist the handler upon his or her request, and always seek their permission beforehand to help.	Don't try to take control in situations unfamiliar to the dog or its handler.
Walk on the handler's right side, a few steps behind him or her.	Don't walk on the dog's left side as it may become distracted or confused.
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.
Allow it to rest undisturbed.	Don't allow children to tease or abuse the dog.
Allow it to meet other animals only with close supervision.	Don't allow other pets to challenge or intimidate a guide dog.
Stroke the dog on the shoulder area – but only with its handler's approval.	Don't pat the dog on the head.