

The search for mould in buildings is a difficult one for industrial hygienists, but for 2-year-old O'lvia, tracking spores to their source is a piece of kibble

Nothing escapes the nose

CHERYL CORNACCHIA
THE GAZETTE

Narcotics, bombs, firearms and missing people are among the things dogs are trained to sniff out. Now, you can add mould to that list.

O'lvia, a gentle 2-year-old Weimaraner with a smooth grey coat and green-blue eyes, is Quebec's first certified mould-sniffer.

Aspergillus ochraceus, a mould that can attack the lungs of immune-suppressed patients, is among the 18 species to which O'lvia's nose will lead you. Pencillium and cladosporium are two others.

"She's can detect mould on the spot," said Anne O'Donnell, O'lvia's owner and a Montreal industrial hygienist who works with O'lvia.

Since September, the two have made a reputation in the field of air-quality control and industrial hygiene.

They have tracked and rooted out mould in five Montreal-area public schools, 16 businesses, 30 private homes and several Quebec hospitals.

With commands of "get to work, O'lvia" and a "seek," the dog starts sniffing walls, nooks and crannies, letting her nose lead her. When she sniffs something suspicious, she lies down.

O'Donnell then asks: "Where?"

With her nose, O'lvia points and then receives a couple of pieces of kibble.

Dogs are built in such a way that they don't inhale the mould into their lungs but simply expel it, O'Donnell said.

"It's a very exciting and growing field," O'Donnell said as she rewarded O'lvia with two bits of kibble for finding a container of planted mould.

Last week, O'Donnell and O'lvia completed their work at Le Pavillon Honoré Mercier, a 355-bed hospital in St. Hyacinthe east of Montreal that closed last October because of mould.

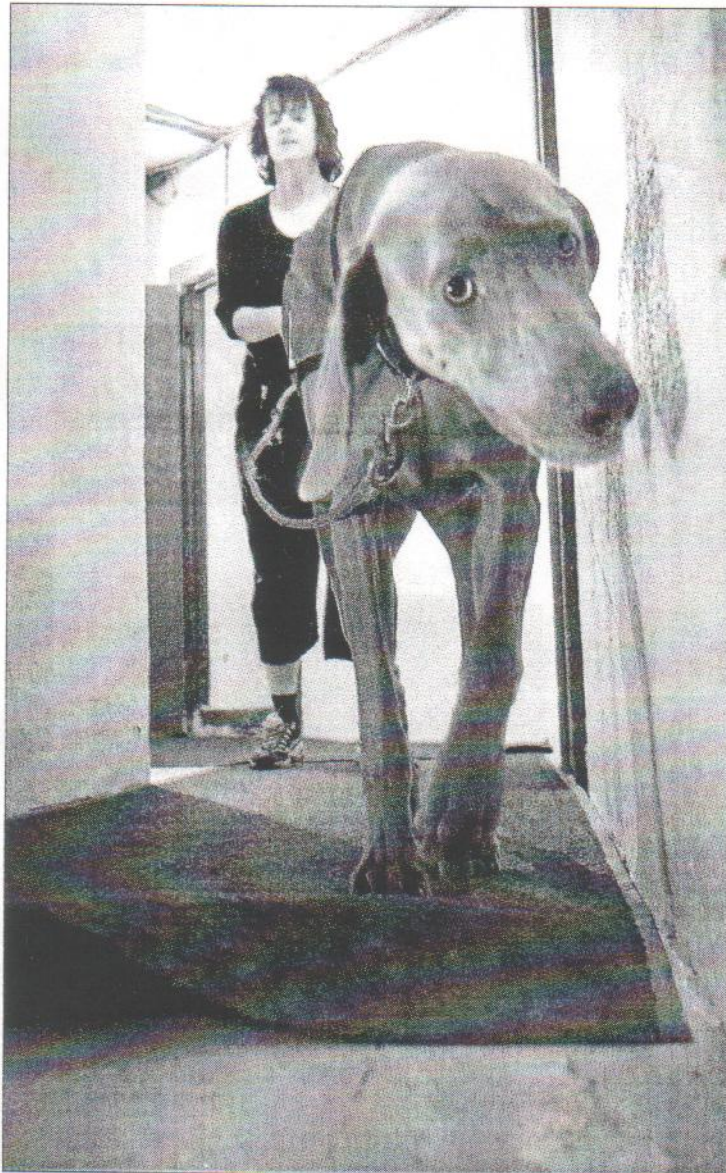
In January, O'lvia found mould in the hospital's walls, beneath its floors and in its ceiling.

"She alerted me to mould lurking behind perfect-looking walls."

O'Donnell said the dog was infallible and enabled demolition crews to speed up their work. "The hospital will soon have a clean bill of health."

O'Donnell charges \$350 for use of the mould dog and \$150 an hour for her time. O'lvia works for an hour, then breaks for an hour, for a total of four hours work a day.

Rollande Allard, a doctor in the envi-



O'lvia, a 2-year-old Weimaraner, sniffs out mould in an apartment basement, while her owner, Anne O'Donnell, follows.

PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

ronment department of the Montréal public-health office, has seen O'lvia at work at a St. Hyacinthe hospital and several South Shore schools, and says she is impressed.

"It's very practical, especially in decontamination," Allard said. "I see the mould dog as complementary to the work industrial hygienists do."

Marie Bourgeois can't thank O'lvia

and O'Donnell enough. After being out of her house since November, she is about to move back in.

During the 1998 ice storm, condensation built up in the walls, ceilings and attic of the house and lead to mould - spachybotrys and aspergillus, the same mould that closed operating rooms at the Royal Victoria Hospital in 2001.

Bourgeois suffered breathing difficulties that sent her to the hospital and she was forced to take cortisone.

A biologist pinpointed some of the mould in her house but it took O'lvia to find the worst contamination - wood shavings in the attic that contained mould at levels 35 times those deemed safe by Health Canada.

"There are a lot of public institutions that hide that they have mould," Bourgeois said. "If they knew how O'lvia can pinpoint the source, they would be happy. The mould can be removed without having to demolish everything."

Like other Canadian cities, Montreal has its share of rotting infrastructure and damp, old buildings where moisture has accumulated and mould has spawned.

Spores hide in wallboard, ceiling tiles, under flooring - just about anywhere there is organic material and moisture is left undetected.

Until recently, however, finding it has been a difficult task, one left to the Quebec's 30 or so industrial hygienists, a group of public-health specialists.

In the absence of tell-tale signs, they have to bore holes into walls, extract air samples and test for spore concentrations and toxicity levels.

The certified mould dog is making their work easier.

In use in Sweden for 20 years, mould dogs are slowly becoming more common in the United States and, now, they are catching on here.

There is one mould dog certified in Ontario and another in British Columbia and word of their work is quickly spreading.

O'Donnell learned how to use O'lvia as a mould dog while working with trainers at the Florida Canine Institute. The program cost about \$20,000, including the \$1,500 she paid for O'lvia.

"My colleagues are impressed," said O'Donnell, who last month presented her work with O'lvia at an annual meeting of Quebec's industrial hygienists.

Studies by the American Board of Industrial Hygienists suggest mould dogs can cut down costs by working faster than industrial hygienists alone and by reducing demolition.

For more information on mould dogs, check out the Web site www.hsst.ca

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