



Sniffing Out Mold

Businesses Employing Trained Dogs To Find Costly Infestations

By MARY UMBERGER
Special To The Courant

June 12 2003

Ben the dog has a \$12,500 nose.

At least that's how much Patrick Harter paid for it a few weeks ago when he bought the Australian shepherd-mix from a trainer in Florida in order to have what he believes is the first "mold dog" to go to work in Illinois.

Dogs are the latest wrinkle in the so-called mold industry, which seems to have sprung up faster than mildew on a shower curtain. In the past year or so hardware stores have begun offering do-it-yourself test kits for mold, and manufacturers are touting new lines of plaster, drywall and paint as mold-resistant.

Businesses dedicated to finding mold, identifying it, getting rid of it and litigating over it have proliferated since mold infestations in schools and multimillion-dollar lawsuits started grabbing headlines a couple of years ago.

Although Illinois has had a significant number of mold-related claims in the past two years that have contributed to rising homeowners' insurance rates, it's far from being the leader of what some in the industry have dubbed the "toxic tort du jour."

Ben and about three dozen other dogs now working around the country are recent graduates of the Florida Canine Academy in Safety Harbor, Fla., which certifies that they have received 1,000 hours of training to sniff out cladosporium and stachybotrys and aspergillus and any number of other fungal undesirables that may lurk in our homes, schools and businesses.

The Florida company primarily trains dogs to detect drugs and bombs, but Harter says it taught Ben to smell mold behind walls, under carpet and in other areas that humans can't see.

"His olfactory system will process parts [of mold] per million, where ours will notice parts per thousand," said Harter, president of AAA Environmental in McHenry, Ill., who says his firm has performed more than 300 mold investigations in the past 18 months. He hopes Ben's sniffer will make testing and remediation

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more efficient, eliminating further tests and repairs where they really aren't needed.

Recently, with a "Hey, boy, want to go to work?" Harter walked his new dog through the Johnsburg, Ill., home of Tami and Dan Chapman, who are worried about the aftermath of a deluge that poured through their back door in May and suspect that the black substance they've found in a leaky window casing in their master bathroom is mold.

It was Ben's first day on the job after his "graduation" on May 31, Harter said, and he cautioned that he and the dog hadn't quite gotten the hang of working together. He said that sometimes he was not quick enough to read the dog's signal - a dip of the head - that he smelled mold, and thus continued to pull on his leash, keeping the dog from sitting down in front of the suspicious spot, as he's supposed to do.

Ben drew attention to some ventilation ducts and a couple of other spots that were logical places for water intrusion, a prime ingredient for mold growth. He also "signaled" at a couple of spots Harter said were extremely unlikely for mold.

Harter took samples of the air and on swabs of solid material in the locations that Ben had pointed out and sent them to a lab in Arizona. He and the Chapmans are awaiting the results.

Texas became ground zero in the mold world two years ago after a court ordered a subsidiary of Farmers Insurance Group to pay \$32 million to the family of Melinda Ballard. She said her insurance adjuster had failed to warn them of the presence of stachybotrys, popularly known as "black mold."

Ballard said her husband and children had become extremely ill from exposure to the mold.

The Ballard decision (the award was subsequently reduced to \$4 million, plus interest and legal fees) set off a rash of media coverage and hundreds of other mold-damage lawsuits that generated huge insurance payouts. In Texas alone, the industry says that mold-related claims went from \$14.4 million in the first quarter of 2000 to \$187.5 million by the end of 2001.

It also provoked a debate about whether mold can even cause serious illness. Just about all that the medical community and federal researchers agree on is that some kinds of mold provoke asthmatic and flu-like symptoms in some people.

Industry watchers say a confluence of events helped generate a perfect storm of interest - some say frenzy - over mold.

There are contributing factors, including an aging housing stock that's becoming more vulnerable to water intrusion from storms and ice damage. And there are more houses than there used to be. The recent building boom has added more than a million homes to the landscape, some of them built with dubious construction practices that might make them vulnerable.

In Brookfield, Wis., mold tester and remediator Scott Santner says he's two months into training his own dog to sniff for mold, and his firm, Cobak Environmental, might acquire a second one. He says competition forces him to find a way to stand out.

"The business is going that way," Santner said. "In 10 years, whoever is in the business who doesn't have a dog is not going to make it. [Customers] are going to call you up, and the first thing they're going to say is, 'Do you have a dog?'"

Mary Umberger is a reporter at the Chicago Tribune.

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