



PET POLICIES



With recent advancements in veterinary medicine, pets are living longer. Medical procedures can be costly.

Almost 43 per cent of the pets in Sweden are insured by their owners. In the U.K. the figure is 23 per cent. Of the 14 million cats and dogs scurrying around Canada, less than one per cent of them are covered. Randy Valpy, the president and CEO of Winnipeg's SecuriCan General Insurance Company, aims to do something about those numbers.

SecuriCan General Insurance Company grew out of Petplan Insurance, a pet insurance brokerage established in 1989. The Winnipeg-based agency was represented nationally and affiliated with Petplan U.K., the largest pet insurer in the world. In April 2004 Petplan and parent company HED Insurance (Hayhurst Elias Dudek) formed SecuriCan. The company was purchased by Western Financial Group last year.

By John Lekich

The SecuriCan General Insurance Company is a Winnipeg-based concern that focuses exclusively on pet insurance. It's the leading pet insurer in the country and the oldest company of its kind in Canada. The company underwrites its own brand of pet insurance under the name Petsecure and underwrites brands for President's Choice Financial, Nestle Purina PetCare, the Canadian Automobile Association and Hbc Financial.

President and CEO Randy Valpy understands that dealing with pets requires a unique emotional perspective. He's been with the company for eight years and knows firsthand how pets can enrich our lives. While his heavy travel schedule makes owning a pet impossible, Valpy considers himself a proud "adoptive pet owner" to his girlfriend's dog Patrick and four cats – Boo, Monte, Percy and Max. It's a mindset he enjoys bringing to work every day.

While pets are considered property under insurance laws, Valpy says, "a pet is a living, breathing entity. For a lot of people, they're members of the family."

"Our company is centred around a pet's welfare. Yes, we have a business to run and we want to make a profit, but at the same time we think we can do a lot of good in the pet community. Our staff is very passionate about pets."

While about 50 per cent of Canadian households have pets, 95 per cent of SecuriCan's employees are pet owners. Valpy says fundraising for pet-oriented charities is regularly undertaken through such office-oriented social activities as potlucks and silent auctions. The company, recently named one of Manitoba's Top 25 Employers, will contribute more than \$100,000 to various pet-based charities this year.

"We don't hire insurance agents," he

says. "We hire people who are passionate about pets and then teach them the insurance aspect of the business."

While a select group of brokers across the country do sell SecuriCan policies, most transactions are direct sales or made through the company's website – www.petsecure.com. Valpy says brokers interested in participating are welcome to contact him.

SecuriCan sales rep Robyn Taylor explains that being a pet owner herself makes it easier to relate to people inquiring about a policy. Taylor – who has an

11-year-old puss named Sable – often brings up personal experiences while talking to potential clients.

"I know the value of dental coverage firsthand," she says. "My cat had to have four teeth removed."

Taylor has been with SecuriCan for four years. Like all employees, she underwent an intensive four-week training period designed to familiarize her with everything from product lines to pet anatomy.

"We have a very high level of customer service. It makes a big difference when a client knows you understand where they're coming from."

Empathy is especially important, since the world of pet care can be more complex than some people realize. With recent advances in veterinary medicine, it's possible for pets to live longer lives. Treatments for pets now include everything from cancer therapies to pacemakers and hip replacements.

"Today, your pet can get an MRI within a couple of days," says Valpy. "Just about everything that can be done for a human can be done for your pet. But there's a cost."

Cancer treatments, for example, can set an owner back more than \$10,000. A dog with spinal or disc problems can mean medical bills of \$7,000 and up. A hip replacement – common in larger breeds of dogs such as labs and retrievers

– can cost up to \$3,000 per hip.

SecuriCan offers policies ranging from under \$30 to \$100 per month. The most expensive package extends beyond a general focus on accident and illness to cover annual checkups and vaccinations. Valpy estimates that the average monthly premium is about \$48 – less than what most pet owners spend on pet food every month. The company currently pays out more than \$1.5 million a month in claims.

Pet insurance has been available in the U.K., where 23 per cent of cats and canines are insured, since the 1940s. In Sweden the percentage of insured pets is even higher – close to 43 per cent. While there are 14.2 million dogs and cats in Canada, Valpy estimates that less than one per cent of that combined population is covered.

"Our biggest challenge as an industry and as a company is a lack of awareness," he explains. "Veterinarians do their best to promote insurance, but it's still a struggle to inform people that it exists as a product and is a viable option."

He says that almost 50 per cent of people who contact SecuriCan for more information purchase a policy.

"As an industry, I think we're growing close to 25 per cent year over year. Even with the tough economy last year, SecuriCan grew 22 per cent. That's down from previous years, where we've been closer to 30 per cent."

SecuriCan recently invested in a state-of-the-art policy administration system worth \$5 million. But, as impressive as such sophisticated technology may be, Valpy is mindful that there's no substitute for old-fashioned problem-solving.

"Of the 66,000 clients we had last year, we had less than 20 complaints we weren't able to solve on the front line. I can't tell you how many phone calls, e-mails and letters we get from clients thanking us and saying their pet is alive today because of our assistance. That tells me we're doing a lot of things right." **iw**



Valpy



Taylor