

Companion Animals: A New Awareness

by Lee Carpenter*
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Seemingly all of a sudden, animal companions are our partners in health! Not just as carcasses to be chipped and chunked, fileted and skewered to fill our gullet, or to be stripped, tanned, and polished to adorn our egos and provide treads. Rather now as seltzers and herbs to soothe man's soul and invigorate his heart and mind. In America and elsewhere the enduring recognition of the "human-animal bond" is flourishing in a new light but one that has flickered for eons.

"A 1980 statement by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges recognizes that ' . . . the health care given to companion animals may be as significant in terms of the mental and emotional health of the individuals in this society as the protection of the food supply is to the [individual's] physical well-being.' More than half the families in this nation keep pets, recognizing their value as friend to the old, the lonely, the physically infirm, the mentally ill; their worth in teaching children tenderness, responsibility, and respect for living creatures; and their contributions to millions in coping with the everyday stress of life."

These were the thoughts of Dr. William McCulloch (ISU '56) professor of veterinary public health and director of the Center for Comparative Medicine at Texas A & M University. Dr. McCulloch was one of the 460 professionals who attended the First International Conference on the Human-Companion Animal Bond on October 5-7, 1981, at the University of Pennsylvania. This three day meeting was comprised of 50 unique presentations. A videotape of elderly in a nursing

home depicted a remarkable interaction. Reports of increased responsiveness, inquisitiveness and increased social interaction among many of the patients was attributed to their frequent contact with pets. The idea of establishing a human-animal bond in the older population had been studied in 1974 by a British animal behaviorist, Roger Mugford.



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He conducted a small study involving 48 elderly people (average age 73) who lived alone. One half of the people were given budgerigars and the other half begonias. After 3 years Mugford reported that in the group with the parakeets there was a higher percentage of community involvement, more friends and visitors and a lower death rate.

A paper by Dr. Peter Messent reviewed a study in which 42 people were each observed while they walked their dogs 100 times. These animals were said to serve as a social catalyst and a bridge to other humans which caused the owners to be more approachable. A workshop discussion centered on "Preserving the Cities for Animals" in which concern was raised for those who were denied the ownership of a pet because of the condemnation of animals from many apartments and condominiums. The problem is especially apparent when the elderly are forced to move from a home into such restrictive housing and hence have to give up their pet. Many even refuse to move. Recommendations for future city planning to include pet facilities was suggested. Other topics at the conference included Health Benefits of Animal Ownership, Biological Bases of the Companion Animal Bond, Management of Grief After Losing a Companion Animal, and Communicating with Animals—Science and Myth.

This meeting has indeed set a precedent. The Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, was responsible for the organization and sponsorship of this conference. This center was founded in 1977 by Robert Marshak, Dean at Pennsylvania, and is headed by an animal ecologist, Dr. Alan Beck. Its staff includes a 16 member team of psychiatrists, biologists, anthropologists, and veterinarians. The main objective of this center is to study the bond between people and their animals and to help educate veterinarians in the understanding of this special bond.

Two other universities that have responded to this rejuvenated awareness of the close interdependence of man and animal by setting up programs are the University of Minnesota and Washington State University. The Study of Human-Animal Relationships and Environments (SHARE) was founded in 1981 at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Stanley Diesch directs this center which is concerned

with studying the beneficial aspects of pet ownership. Additional areas of interest of SHARE are confinement facilities and livestock slaughter methods.

Washington State University is also involved in this "new" discipline. The People's Pet Partnership program (PPP) was founded in 1979 by the dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Leo K. Bustad, who is also author of the book *Animals, Aging, and the Aged*. PPP is a community based volunteer operation involved in educating children to care for and assume responsibilities for a pet, for providing the physically handicapped with horseback riding classes, and placing pet mascots in nursing homes.

Universities are not the only institutions that have responded to this new interdisciplinary field. Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Ohio was one of the pioneers in exploring the therapy offered by animals. David Lee, a social worker, described how populations of animal life including fish, parrots, gerbils, macaws, and white mice in the prison community helped in socializing the inmates. Overall there are reports of an improved morale, a calmer atmosphere, and a decrease in violence and suicide attempts. Inmates have to demonstrate that they will devote the time and responsibility necessary to care for an animal and have to earn the right to have a pet. A greenhouse has been incorporated onto the prison grounds and the men raise and sell plants while profit goes toward the maintenance of the pet program.

Other prisons across the country have followed the model started at Lima State. An inmate at the Lorton Reformatory in Virginia who is serving a 10-40 year term for burglary speaks fondly of his feline cell mates. "They give you love. They don't talk back, and they don't steal from you."

Comradery, a sense of security and a focus of attention, a feeling of purpose, something to touch and care for, exercise and safety (seeing-eye and hearing-ear dogs) are some of the numerous gifts animals bestow on man. Experiences in nursing homes, hospitals, penal institutions, homes for the mentally retarded and physically handicapped as well as normal family circles have documented the value of fostering the human-animal bond in terms of happiness and general well being, alleviation of depression and an escape from social isolation. These observed changes are

being corroborated by studies which investigate and measure the effect of the human-animal bond on people's physiological health.

Heading a research team at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, psychiatrist Dr. Aaron Katcher and biologist-epidemiologist Dr. Erika Friedmann studied social factors related to survival rates of coronary patients. Out of 92 patients discharged from the coronary care unit of the university hospital, 53 were pet owners and 39 were not pet owners. Twenty-eight percent of the latter group died within one year compared to only 6% of those who owned pets. Although there is no known mechanism of pets' role in the health of an owner, the source of psychological comfort is suggestive of the correlation between survival and pet ownership. This same team of researchers has also noted that there is a decrease in blood pressure while people watch fish swimming in a tank. Additionally, a person's blood pressure has a tendency to decrease or stay the same when talking to an animal or when there is a dog present in the same room. In contrast, there is an increase in blood pressure when people converse with other people.

A five year project at the National Institute on Aging and Johns Hopkins University is now underway. Epidemiologists Marcia Ory and Evelyn Goldberg, are studying the health consequences of bereavement and hope that this investigation of the role of pets after a spouse's death will aid in the further understanding of the health aspects of the human-animal bond.

Individuals may choose to argue with some of the conclusions reached in this new area of scientific research due to the observational nature and sometimes loose experimental design that some of these studies are forced to work within. Furthermore, emotions and feelings such as affection, compassion and devotion are tough to quantify. However, it is difficult to ignore the beneficial role of companion animals in our society, and it is important to dispel some of the stereotypic and damaging attitudes which condemn pets as nothing more than childish preoccupations or food consuming and self-indulgent commodities.

Psychologists accept various manifestations of the human-animal bond as evidence of our

emotional attachments to pets. Pets are named, groomed, given manicures and facelifts. Moreover, animal actions are ascribed anthropomorphic expression. And the predominance of companion animal veterinarians in our profession attests to man's concern for the nurture and well-being of these lesser creatures in our society.

Certainly, too, man is likewise dependent emotionally in many ways on pets. One form is grief (from anger to sobbing and despair), as expressed at the loss of pets. Dr. Alton Hopkins of Dallas (Texas), commenting at the last AVMA convention in St. Louis, said that families typically shed a few tears and exchange embraces when their pet dies. But in a sizeable minority of cases when the human-pet bond is broken by the death of the pet, the grief reaction is intense and the veterinarian should be prepared to respond in an appropriate manner.

In general "when the veterinarian treats an animal, he or she, willingly or not, becomes a part of the pet-owner's emotional investment . . . [and] the owner will tend to perceive you [the veterinarian] as an extension of him/herself. Thus, you will be most effective if you respond not only to the objective requirements of the situation, but also to the client's feelings, attitudes, and concerns," says psychologist Dr. Pauline Wallin of the University of Minnesota. Dr. Alton has seen "macho" hunters wilt in grief at the loss of their dogs and, in other cases, seemingly unattached family members who paid little attention to the family pet unexpectedly broke into convulsions of sobbing. Sometimes owners, rightly or wrongly, feel guilty that their pet died. In all cases, the good veterinarian knows how to respond, which, says Dr. Alton, is with compassion.

Dr. Wallin says the "most popular and effective veterinarians are those who can . . . [enter] into a personal relationship with the client and the pet, even if this relationship extends no further than the 20-minute time span of the office visit." She suggests that the veterinarian initiate some touching such as a handshake or light touch on the shoulder to generate trust. Also, look at people when conversing with them, handle the pet as the owner does, reinforce the owner's sense of esteem and responsibility, and portray a sense of calm confidence to relieve the client's anxiety, fear, or grief.

A final point, one about something that is just beginning but is sure to develop as a consequence of society's growing appreciation of the human-pet bond and one which is very practical to consider: more and more nursing homes as well as the other institutions previously mentioned will have resident companion animal populations. Veterinary advice will be needed for planning, and practitioners will be expected to make house calls as a vital part of the overall health care system of these institutional communities.

It would be misleading to confer that pets are a panacea to all ills, but of equal deception would be to slight the role of these animals as an integral component of our society.

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