



The Changing Roles
of Animals in Society
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people and found that the pet-owning group showed significantly fewer physical symptoms associated with the bereavement than did their non-owning counterparts.

INTRODUCTION

The 8th International Conference on Human–Animal Interactions, entitled ‘The Changing Roles of Animals in Society’, was held in Prague, Czech Republic, on September 10–12, 1998. The conference was held by the International Association of Human–Animal Interaction Organisations (IAHAIO), with WALTHAM as its primary sponsor, and brought together over 800 participants from 42 countries across the world. As the study of human–animal interactions is multi-disciplinary, delegates came from a wide variety of backgrounds including veterinarians, health psychologists, ethologists, medical practitioners, and representatives of Government bodies and Non-Governmental Organizations. There was strong competition to get papers onto the program, and, after a blind peer-review selection procedure, 106 presentations were selected from 200 submissions.

The program consisted of 9 plenary sessions with topics ranging from historical and cultural aspects of relationships with animals, and the role of animals in human crisis, to the role of animals in enhancing human health and quality of life. The main body of the program also had a wide variety of papers with some sessions focusing on human health covering ‘*The role of companion animals in social support*’, ‘*Companion animals and human health*’, and ‘*Animal-assisted activities and therapy*’, while other sessions were of more general interest such as historical and cultural aspects of human–animal interactions. There were also a number of sessions that were of particular relevance to veterinarians namely ‘*Veterinary education and pet loss*’ and ‘*Animal Behavior*’. Outside the main program, there were numerous special sessions and satellite meetings by national human–animal interactions organizations with fascinating topics such as ‘*The human–animal relationship in world religions*’.

There was a vast amount of interesting new material presented at this meeting, and it is impossible to review everything in an article of this type. Instead I will initially focus on key areas of interest for the veterinary profession and then review some new research on health benefits to humans from pet ownership.

KEY POINTS

- The 8th International Conference on Human–Animal Interactions ‘The Changing Roles of Animals in Society’ attracted 800 participants from 42 countries.
- A number of papers discussed the role of the veterinary profession in human–animal interactions. Delegates heard how the changing role of women in society may have affected human perception of animals in society and were asked to consider how the global increase in female veterinarians may have an impact on the veterinary profession.
- One of the main areas emphasized during the meeting was the current status of research on how people may benefit from pet ownership. A new study has shown that people undergo the lowest cardiovascular reactivity to stress in the presence of their dog or cat and the highest when in the presence of their spouse!
- A WALTHAM-supported study reported benefits of pet ownership to people undergoing major life crises. The study examined recently widowed



Figure 1
Dr. Bruce Fogle delivering his lecture entitled: 'The Changing Roles of Animals in Western Society' at the 8th International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions.



Figure 2
Many assistance dogs were present at the Prague Conference.

THE ROLE OF THE VETERINARY PROFESSION IN HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS

As part of the plenary program, Bruce Fogle from the Portman Veterinary Clinic in London, UK, gave a paper entitled '*The changing roles of animals in Western society: Influences upon and from the veterinary profession.*' Dr. Fogle observed that for centuries, the role of animals was relatively static and well defined, serving our utilitarian need by providing food, clothing, and transportation. During these times, the veterinary profession evolved as a male trade to attend to these practical requirements. Until relatively recently the main emphasis of a veterinarian's role was to ensure the optimum function of animals used for transportation and to maintain the health of breeding stock and food animals. However, from the start of the 20th century and increasingly in the last few decades, the role of animals has changed. Bruce Fogle argued that one of the reasons for this change was the emergence of women as a social force in electoral politics, in media activities, and in the veterinary profession. Women brought a different cognitive orientation and new feelings of empathy towards animals that in the 1960s coincided with an emerging interest in Eastern thought and increasing belief in the sentience of all living creatures.

Commenting on the relevance of this change to the veterinary profession, Dr. Fogle cited research that suggested that empathy with animals and concern about animal welfare diminish during veterinary education (1). However, he noted that another study suggested that empathy only diminishes among male students and female students retain a high level of empathy and suffer more stress over ethical dilemmas (2). Today, although both wild and domesticated animals are increasingly valued for social, psychological, or aesthetic reasons rather than functional or utilitarian purposes, and the majority of veterinary students in Western countries are female, Fogle argued that female views of the role of animals and their sentience were considered to be somewhat abnormal. In addition, he thought that students who suggested that their primary motivation for studying veterinary medicine was a love of animals had a lower chance of admission to a course because the veterinary profession and veterinary education have responded slowly to the changing roles of animals in society.

Following his discussion on the role of women in changing attitudes in the veterinary profession, Fogle turned his attention to veterinary education. He noted that although there had been changes in veterinary curricula in many countries to encompass courses in animal behavior and human-animal relationships, there was still considerable scope for further changes to better equip veterinarians to deal with companion animal behavior and the human-animal relationships.

With Dr. Fogle having thrown down the gauntlet, other papers presented at the conference demonstrated how some progress had

been made in addressing some of his critique, namely the need for a greater understanding of human-animal relationships and for continuing veterinary education in this area.

VETERINARY EDUCATION ON HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION

Suzanne Barnard from the American Humane Association (AHA) argued that an understanding of the human-animal relationship was essential for the economic viability of veterinarians. She stated that many animals were surrendered to animal care or control facilities for inappropriate behavior that could be addressed by veterinary health care professionals. In addition, neglect or abuse of animals could be prevented if veterinarians were aware of early warning signs and provided assistance to owners. She reported that to assist veterinarians in addressing these points, AHA had developed an interactive training program for 3rd year veterinary medical students that had been successfully piloted at Colorado State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital. Barnard reported that the program was designed to educate veterinarians about the dynamics of child and animal abuse and encourage cooperative intervention between veterinarians and other health professionals. The program was successful, and it has led to the development of several guidebooks for veterinarians, and has strengthened the vital community resource that they provide.

Mary Stewart from the Veterinary School, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK, reviewed veterinary education with respect to human-animal interactions by visiting veterinary schools known to be active in this field and by a questionnaire-based survey of primarily North American Veterinary schools. She was interested in the way schools approached issues such as interpersonal skills and client relationships, management of animal death and client support, and ethical issues related to human-animal relationships. Her results indicated that coverage of these topics was variable ranging from 'extensive to sparse'. Although many schools recognized the importance of these areas, they were unable to formally address them, usually because of overcrowded curricula or insufficient funding. Mary Stewart argued that emphasis of this area was heavily influenced by individual members of staff with a strong interest of commitment to the subject. However, she felt that the subject could be included within existing courses, particularly with new case-based teaching methods that were more likely to address the needs of the client along with those of their animals.

THE ROLE OF THE VETERINARIAN IN SUPPORT FOLLOWING PET LOSS

Two papers considered the issue of pet loss and support for owners. Tania Woods from the Centre for the Study of Health



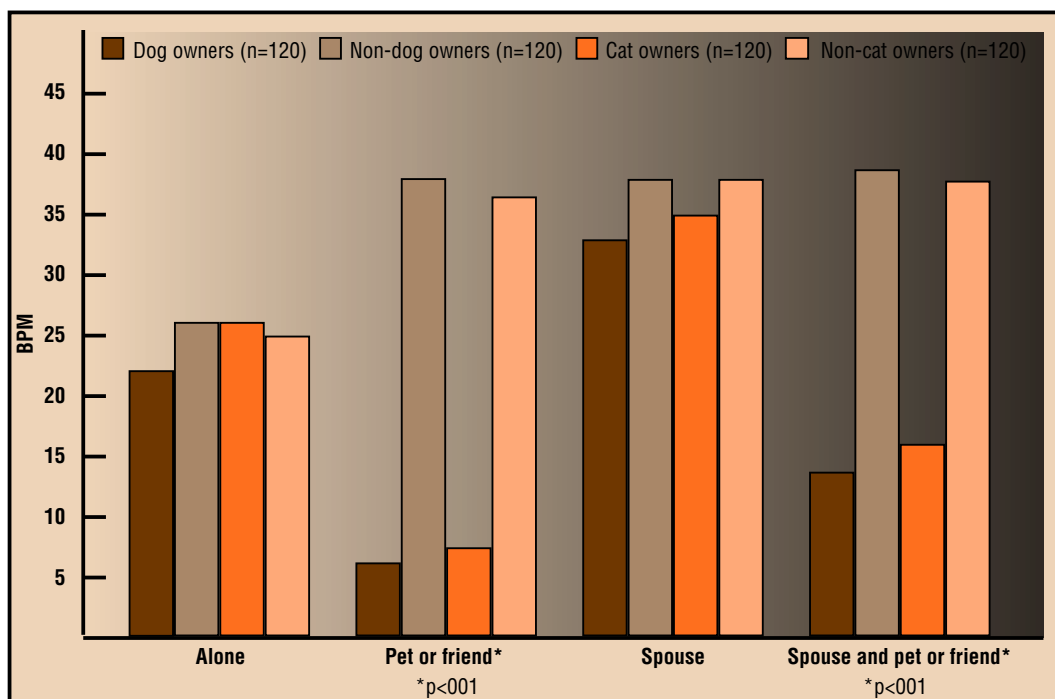


Figure 3
Changes in heart rate from baseline during mental arithmetic: comparison of cat and dog owners and non-owners. Subjects were assessed either alone, in the presence of their spouse, or with a pet or friend. In the pet or friend condition, owners had their cat or dog present and non-owners chose a close personal friend. Pet owners showed a smaller change in heart rate in response to the stressor when their pet was present.

Sickness and Disablement at the University of West London, UK, discussed the Society for Companion Animal Studies' Pet Loss Support Service, a telephone help-line that was established in 1994. The service, which is often advertised in veterinary practices in the UK, aims to provide support for anyone who has been, or is expecting to be, separated from their pet. A review of 950 calls to the service revealed that the service was primarily used as an immediate source of support by dog and cat owners whose pet had recently died. Following Bruce Fogle's comments about female empathy in his paper (see above), it was interesting to note that 88% of calls to the service were from women. The case notes from the service revealed that many of the calls were from owners who had a very strong relationship with their pet that was often a consequence of length of ownership or having nursed a sick animal before death. However, many reports of close relationships were as a result of the animal being a source of support and companionship during traumatic life events such as divorce, personal disablement, or the death of a loved one. The latter cases were particularly important if the animal was regarded as the last link with the deceased person.

Discussing a related subject, Jolle Kirpenstein, from the University of Utrecht, Netherlands, presented results of an evaluation of owner experiences following euthanasia of their horse. While interest in owner responses following loss of a cat or dog has received some attention in recent years, responses of horse owners have received little attention, mirroring to a certain extent the general lack of information on human-horse relationships. The study involved telephone interviews with 58 owners who had their horses euthanized by lethal injection.

Owners were present at the euthanasia in 83% of cases, and 84% of these owner-observed cases were described as peaceful. Veterinarians should note the owners describing the euthanasia as peaceful and those describing their veterinarian as friendly and compassionate were significantly more happy with the procedure. Indeed, it was the 10% of owners who described the euthanasia as a 'bad experience' who had significantly more unanswered questions about the euthanasia and had a significantly longer period of grief following the process. While most owners received support from family and friends, 41% wanted their veterinarian to support them through the process. It was interesting to note that the relationship between owner and veterinarian was significantly better after owners



Figure 4
The response of horse owners to the death of their animals has received little attention from the scientific community, although many owners want support from their veterinarian.

perceived the euthanasia process as satisfactory.

The information presented in the above studies is useful to the veterinary profession as it can help to identify clients who may need extra support when a pet dies or is euthanized. Such support can be as simple as a card sent to the owner expressing sorrow at the loss of the pet or the provision of information on pet loss support groups but may be more sophisticated such as practice staff who are trained to give counselling and support or special arrangements to allow for owners' wishes during euthanasia. While such activities require planning and resource, they are likely to benefit a practice.

SO DO PETS PROVIDE BENEFITS?

The above review focuses on aspects of the Prague conference that may be of particular relevance to the veterinary profession. However, much new material on health benefits from pet ownership was also presented. This should be of interest to veterinarians if only because many are pet owners who have stressful and demanding lifestyles!

Dr. Karen Allen, a WALTHAM Research Fellow from the School of Medicine, State University of New York, USA, presented results of her research examining the impact of pet ownership on cardiovascular reactivity to stress. Dr. Allen was particularly interested in social

interactions with pets since some models of cardiovascular health suggest that human friends may attenuate or prevent a heightened response to a stressful event. For two trials (one for dogs owners and one for cat owners), Allen recruited subjects and matched them with groups of non-owners. Following assessment of baseline blood pressure and heart rate, each participant was subjected to both psychological and physical stress (mental arithmetic or a hand placed into iced water) and their reactivity to this stress was assessed when they were alone, with their pet (or with a close personal friend if the subject was not a pet owner), with their spouse, or with their spouse and their pet (or friend for non-pet owners).

Allen found that increases in heart rate or systolic blood pressure during the mental arithmetic were significantly lower when a subject's dog or cat was present than when they were alone. The biggest response to the stressor occurred when the subjects were in the presence of their spouse! Responses in the presence of a close personal friend in the non-owner group did not mirror those of the pet owners when their pet was present and was greater than when the subjects were alone. For the physical stressor, the condition inducing the greatest reactivity was when subjects were alone. The presence of a cat or dog actually reduced heart rate below baseline and was significantly different to the presence of a friend or spouse.

In the second part of her plenary paper, Allen went on to present data from a further study designed to examine some of the possible mechanisms behind benefits from pets. The study examined attitudes and reactivity among married couples. Participants kept diaries for 2 weeks of all social interactions (people [and animals if pet owners]) and were given a questionnaire to assess their relationships. Couples were also asked to engage in a discussion on a subject designed to generate some conflict (e.g., money or children). For pet owners, the best predictor of reactivity to stress was the number of interactions with the pet, with those owners having the most interactions showing the least reactivity. For non-owners the best predictor of reactivity was their total number of social interactions. Other data showed that pet owners had more frequent and satisfying interactions with people as well as with their pets. These data complement Allen's earlier studies by showing that social interaction is a good predictor of cardiovascular reactivity psychological stress. Pet owners have satisfying social interactions both with their pets and other people, which helps to explain their lower cardiovascular reactivity.

A series of papers from a research group at the University of Warwick, UK, complemented Karen Allen's work. June McNicholas, a WALTHAM Research Fellow, discussed possible mechanisms to explain the observed health benefits from pets. The first is simply a non causal relationship, where some unknown factor predisposes people to be healthy and also to be pet owners, and McNicholas commented that studies designed to show a non causal relationship have failed to detect one. A second hypothesis proposes an indirect effect of pet ownership where pets facilitate another factor (such as increased contact with people) that in turn has an impact on health. Such an hypothesis is plausible since Dr. Allen's studies discussed earlier show how pet owners have more frequent and satisfying social interactions with other people. In addition, other research from Warwick University that was presented at Prague showed that a dog was a powerful social catalyst, facilitating social interactions between people even when the owner had been experimentally manipulated to give them a less socially desirable appearance.

A third possible hypothesis to account for the link between pets and health is that pets have a direct causal effect on the health of their owners. In support of this third hypothesis, McNicholas presented data from a study of recently widowed subjects that examined the influence of supportive relationships (both human and



Figure 5 Owners who have more interaction with their pet, show less reactivity to stress.

animal) on adjustment to loss of a spouse. At 3 months after bereavement, there were significant differences between subjects in the prevalence of physical symptoms. The effect, however, was restricted to the contrast between pet owners and non-pet-owning groups, with the pet-owning group reporting fewer symptoms. A similar significant difference was noted at 6 months after bereavement, but after 11 months differences between the groups had decreased and were nonsignificant, indicating that all groups were adjusting to their loss. The results suggest that pets may provide valuable support during the early stages of bereavement, which is additional to and independent from that provided by human relationships.

The results from these and other studies show the progress that has been made in this field. Scientists are no longer just looking for beneficial effects of pet ownership, they are examining mechanisms behind these effects and trying to tie them into mainstream hypotheses about human social interactions and health.

In summary, by examining the changing roles of animals in society, Prague '98 highlighted the great advances that have been made in our understanding of human-animal relationships, but in doing so, it also posed more questions and defined new research areas that need to be addressed. The Prague conference was a very successful event building on the success of the previous meeting in Geneva in 1995 (a selection of papers from the Geneva Conference can be found in Wilson and Turner 1998). The next conference has been set for Rio, Brazil in 2001, so please make a note in your calendars.

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