Pets & Human Health

More than two-thirds of North Americans live with at least 1 pet. Pets can be beneficial to human health (zooeyia) as well as harmful (zoonosis). In order to harness these benefits and minimize the detriments, physicians need to be cognizant of their patients’ pets. There is good evidence supporting the beneficial role of pets in 4 main areas: building social capital, reducing harm, motivating healthy behavior changes, and participating in treatment plans. Pets help people engage with their neighbors and create feelings of attachment and well-being. Dog ownership is a reliable indicator of increased physical activity, and pet ownership among seniors with Medicare reduced their medical needs. In 1 study, pets were more effective than angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors in controlling hypertension in response to stress.

Risks of pet ownership include injury, zoonotic disease, and resource prioritization problems. The most common zoonotic diseases seen in primary practice include dermatophytosis, toxocariasis, Salmonella infection, and avian psittacosis. Childhood asthma is a common pet-related concern, but early exposure to pets lowers the likelihood of developing allergies and asthma.

Patient decision-making can be affected by emotional concern for a pet, and physicians should be keenly aware of the damage they may cause to the physician-patient therapeutic alliance if they suggest removing a pet from a home. Simply asking a patient about pets can significantly strengthen this alliance, with basic questions regarding the presence, number, and species of pets in the home. Physicians should also be willing to consult their veterinary colleagues regarding zoonotic concerns.

Global Commentary
The human-animal bond (HAB) has been much discussed from an owner-animal-veterinary viewpoint but now might be also viewed from a One Health perspective. Although this review centers on human and animal healthcare in North America, the implications are truly global in perspective. Healthcare, whether in a developing country or a first-world country, continues to be a divisive discussion as related to economics, culture, and politics. The value and significance of the HAB as it relates to human health has now moved past intuitional and anecdotal information to evidence-based science, which can no longer be ignored by either the human or animal healthcare professions. As Dr. Michael J. McCulloch, a founder of the HAB group the Delta Society succinctly stated: “In an age of research when it is tempting to reduce emotions to biochemical reactions and to rely heavily on the technology of medicine, it is refreshing to find that a person’s health and well-being may be improved by prescribing contact with other living things. Members of the health and allied professions must continue to combine resources, work together in the spirit of cooperation, and never forget to “cure when possible but comfort always.” — Gregg K. Takashima, DVM

Source

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