Sustainable Futures for Veterinary Practice

The Human Animal Bond

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“The diagnosis and treatment of animal health problems is only one aspect of modern veterinary practice. The primary difference between a good veterinary practitioner and a merely adequate one lies in the former’s ability to gauge and understand client–patient relationships”.

(Professor James Serpell, University of Pennsylvania 1999)

The human animal bond lies at the heart of companion animal practice. The trouble that clients go to financially and practically to ensure the well being of their pets is testimony to the importance of the relationship they have with their pets. While on the one hand our role as veterinarians is to restore and maintain good health in our patients, clients respond strongly to the acknowledgement and validation of their pet’s importance in their life. It is through understanding the depth and complexity of the bond that practitioners can deepen and strengthen their relationship with clients. This extra dimension that we can add to practice is based on the appreciation, understanding and validation of the emotional foundation of client–pet relationships.

It is important to understand at the outset that pet owner relationships are based on strong emotional bonding and attachment. Unlike other relationships the unique nature of the human animal bond affords a degree of comfortable simplicity that it is rarely possible to achieve in human interactions. Our companion animals offer us unconditional acceptance, constantly available company, unquestioning loyalty, trust, lack of judgement, no demands or expectations, relatively constant personality, touch and perhaps above all else – no conflict – at least not of the type we have with other humans. Yet owners often use the same terminology they apply to their human relationships to describe how they feel about the connection with their animal - friend, kindred spirit, partner, soul mate and child.

This humanisation of pets – so-called anthropomorphism - can extend to attributing the full range of human characteristics to animals including behaviours, thoughts, personality, appearance and the perception of mutual understanding and communication.¹

Perhaps what is more important than anything else is the fact that clients usually feel love for and perceive love from their pets. What I perceive and have been told repeatedly by my clients is that their pets fulfill a powerful role and purpose in their life by satisfying their basic human need to matter to and want to feel connected to another being.
What follows is an examination of the different types of role and function pets can serve in the life of owners.

**Surrogate human beings**
It is common for pets to be assigned the role of surrogate humans especially in the case of child substitutes. In my practice it is common for people to openly identify that they consider their pets to be substitute children, siblings, partners or friends. Clients who view their pets as surrogate children identify that they enjoy being able to fulfill the role of caregiver and nurturer. Clients often take into consideration the needs of their pets when making important decisions such as moving residence, taking holidays, changing work or planning a family.

**Stabilising influence**
Pets can serve as a stabilizing influence through life transitions and hard times. Owners derive comfort from a familiar companion as they negotiate normal life transitions including marriage, divorce and separation, birth and raising children, death, moving location and periods of loneliness and isolation. Worthy of special mention is the support animals unwittingly give to people in times of illness. Clients suffering from chronic debilitating illness of varying kinds often identify the primary importance of their pet in helping them cope. Aside from the companionship they receive, having the responsibility of looking after a pet gives them a sense of loving purpose and their day a basic structure based around feeding and exercise. I have observed that clients who suffer from serious depression often value the companionship of their pet as the one thing that “gets them through”.

**Symbolic link**
Pets can serve as a symbolic link to a special person, time, place or life event. This may be a previous residence, home, a child who has grown up and left home, a relative who is unable to continue caring for their pet, an ex partner, a deceased pet or another country. Of special significance is the situation where a pet is a living link to a deceased person – usually a parent but sometimes a child, partner or sibling. In this instance the pet unwittingly serves as a way for people to stay connected to the deceased person.

**Primary source of emotional and social support**
In the modern world where work takes up an increasing amount of time, a larger percentage of the population is staying single and the divorce rate hovers around 50% there are sadly an increasing number of people living more isolated lives. In this growing group and any other living in isolation including the elderly, pets can often provide the primary source of social and emotional support.⁠¹

**Practical benefits**
Depending on the type of animal, pet ownership can offer the additional practical benefits to the owner of regular exercise, safety and the enjoyment of sharing fun activities. There are many studies which have identified health benefits to pet owners. Additionally pets can teach children about responsibility and ultimately be their introduction to death and all it encompasses. The value of Animal Assisted Therapy is now widely recognized and utilized for the sick and elderly, particularly those who are institutionalised, and children who have special educational needs.

**Client Care**
In order to foster goodwill through developing a deeper relationship with clients it is essential for practitioners to seek to understand, for each client, the nature and significance of the
relationship they have with their pet. Clients will often reveal clues as to the significance of their pet e.g. a sick child’s constant companion. Equally you can develop the subtle art of inquiry over time in order to discover the nature of any particular human animal relationship.

The natural extension of this skill is to incorporate a new aspect of client care into practice – namely identifying and acknowledging the emotional needs of clients. These arise concurrently with the medical needs of the patient and need to be addressed simultaneously. The skill necessary to achieve this is to be able to identify and validate the client’s feelings – commonly anxiety, worry, fear, mistrust, sadness, helplessness, powerlessness and sometimes anger. Pay particular attention at special times like accident/injury, anaesthesia, surgery, hospitalisation and delivering diagnoses. A client having to be separated from their pet for any reason is a potentially stressful situation. Remember that what may be simple and straightforward to us medically or surgically may be confusing, worrying or frightening for the client.

In order to develop this skill you need to listen closely and pick up clues as to what the client may be experiencing emotionally. Difficult as it may seem try to walk in their shoes and their reality without judgement or criticism. Reflect back to them what you have observed or ask an open question - “I’m not sure but it sounds like you’re worried about Fido?” Then acknowledge their worry / concern as being perfectly understandable and do your best to allay their concerns – “I understand entirely –I know how much he means to you. We’re going to do everything we can to get him better.”

In extending yourself this way and developing this dimension of practice you convey to clients a powerful message of caring not only about their pet but also about them.

References