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## BEST FRIENDS

How the evolving human-animal bond means changes for the veterinary profession **26**

At the Helm

An inside look at AAHA's new president **33**





# The *Healing* Power of *Pets*

Mounting evidence of the human-animal bond creates opportunity—and great responsibility—for the veterinary profession

by Jen Reeder

U.S. NAVY VETERAN VIC MARTIN KNOWS FIRSTHAND the value of the human-animal bond. While deployed in the Persian Gulf in 2013, he suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Back home with his family, he found the injury caused speech issues, like stuttering, and he had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) marked by depression, night terrors, and disorientation in public. He lived in nearly constant fear.

“I didn’t do anything for a year and half, and gave up on life,” Martin says.

But everything changed after he adopted Kira, a Labrador retriever/Pit bull terrier mix, from Shelter to Soldier. The California-based nonprofit rescues dogs and trains them as psychiatric service dogs for post-9/11 combat veterans with PTSD and/or TBI. Now, when Martin has night terrors, Kira climbs onto his chest and licks his face until he

wakes up, and alerts Martin’s wife to the situation. The dog calms Martin down when a helicopter flies over the house, and leads him back to his car if he becomes disoriented on an outing. Kira knows when to nudge his hand so he’ll focus on her instead of his rising fear.

“The comfort that she brings me, the security that she brings me... I used to not be able to take a shower if I was the only person in the house,” Martin says. “I just feel safe with her. Dogs are medicine if they’re given the opportunity to be medicine.”

Vic Martin walking with Kira

Photo Courtesy of Shelter to Soldier





Testimonials like Martin's will come as no surprise to veterinary professionals familiar with the benefits of the human-animal bond. But scientific documentation of the value of companion animals—from service dogs to family pets—to human health and well-being is changing the role of pets in society. As the human-animal bond continues to deepen while gaining widespread acceptance, it will create opportunities for veterinarians as pet owners seek the best possible care for their animals, but it will also heighten responsibility.

Alan Beck, ScD, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine, has been studying the human-animal bond since the 1970s. He says pet ownership has many health benefits for humans.

"It is more than a hobby; it has a real role," he says.

For instance, Beck (pets: mixed-breed dogs Lili and Luci) and his colleagues have conducted studies that found humans experience a decline in blood pressure from interacting with a dog—a bigger drop than experienced when interacting with other humans or even just resting. Other studies have shown people who have a cardiac event, like a heart attack, have a fivefold greater one-year survival rate if they have a companion animal; that gazing into a dog's eyes produces the bonding hormone oxytocin; and that children raised with dogs have reduced risk of developing anxiety or allergies (when exposed at a young age).

Beck was recently part of groundbreaking research for treatment of people with advanced Alzheimer's disease, who typically experience weight loss because they are too distracted or agitated to eat.

"Because nature is such a wonderful focus of attention, we've been showing you can use plain old fish tanks to calm people in Alzheimer's units to the point where they eat more," Beck says. "So that was a major contribution taking advantage of a very obvious role that animals play: They hold our attention."

He says as the importance of animals to human health is increasingly appreciated, the role of veterinarians will keep evolving.

"Delivering the message that if we take good care of our animals, they'll take good care of us, is actually very good business for a veterinary practice."

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—STEVEN FELDMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HABRI

"There's an ever-continuing realization that veterinary medicine is both human and animal health care," Beck says.

Veterinary professionals can help people and their animals while also combatting the problem of pet overpopulation. As trusted advisors, veterinarians can offer insights to prevent or resolve behavior issues that might land a cat or dog in a shelter. Even just getting clients in the door has a positive impact, Beck notes.

"People who go at least once a year to the veterinarian, especially twice a year, are much more likely to keep their animal for a normal life span than people who go less than once a year to the veterinarian," he says.

Because of all the existing and emerging data about the human-animal bond, in 2010, Purdue University partnered with the nascent Human-Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation to create a database called HABRI Central. It is now the world's largest online library of human-animal bond research and information, with more than 25,000 keyword-searchable resources on human-animal interaction science.

Steven Feldman, executive director of HABRI, says the nonprofit research and education organization not only compiles study papers but has spent more than \$500,000 funding new research projects, and, at the time of writing, was preparing to award a third round of grants. The organization was founded in 2010 by the American Pet Products Association (APPA), Zoetis, and Petco; AAHA joined the HABRI Steering Committee in 2015.

"Everyone's united in sharing this message that pets are good for our health," Feldman says. "Pets shouldn't be perceived as a luxury or something that's just nice to have. They should really be perceived as essential to our health... we need to put the solid research behind it."

For example, HABRI is funding research on the benefits of service dogs to military veterans with PTSD and TBI. Feldman says the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) currently will provide benefits to cover service dogs for veterans with physical disabilities, but not for those with PTSD or TBI because there isn't scientific evidence to support their use.

"This study, along with one that's being performed by the VA, may actually give us the evidence we need to make sure that even more veterans can benefit from having a service animal," Feldman says.

In 2015, a HABRI-funded survey of 1,000 family doctors and general practitioners found 97% of physicians reported they believe there are health benefits from pet ownership, and 74% would prescribe a pet to improve overall health if the medical evidence supported it.

"So, there's no barrier in terms of how they feel—now we just have to put the science in front of them and connect them with their veterinary colleagues so we can make sure that more people benefit from pets in their lives," Feldman says.

In the meantime, Feldman (pet: "purebred mutt" Scout) says veterinarians should tell clients about the scientific benefits of pet ownership.

"If you ask most pet owners, 'Did you know pets are good for you?' they'll say, 'Of course.' But when you take the next step and say, 'There's actually some very interesting scientific research to back this up,' it reinforces what they may already feel and speaks to how important the veterinarian is to society," he says. "Delivering the message that if we take good care of our animals, they'll take good care of us, is actually very good business for a veterinary practice."

Edward Creagan, MD, FAAHPM, professor of medical oncology at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine in Rochester, Minn., and author of *How Not to Be My Patient*, has had more than 40,000 connections with terminally ill patients. He says he has seen pets enable patients "to pass away with peace and dignity" and is a proponent of animal-assisted therapy in hospitals; Mayo Clinic has become a pioneer in the modality, in part due to the publication of a paper Creagan coauthored, titled "Animal-assisted therapy at Mayo Clinic: The time is now."



"There's an ever-continuing realization that veterinary medicine is both human and animal health care."

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—ALAN BECK, ScD, DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY'S COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

"This is not hocus pocus or science fiction; this is rock-solid science on the healing power of pets," he says. "Without question, it enhances quality of life."

Creagan (pets: cats Emily and Chloe) says his "aha moment" occurred in the 1990s while treating a patient with advanced cancer. When the man was coherent, he kept repeating that he needed to get home to spend time with "Max." Creagan was surprised when he learned "Max" was a 95-pound German shepherd mix.

"It was the animal that was the catalyst for his survival, rather than a spouse or a partner," Creagan says. "So that's what opened my eyes."

Creagan has found discussing pets with patients brings smiles even when they are in the midst of "charged emotional nightmares," so he keeps records of pets' names to be able to lighten the mood when discussing prognoses. He says there is an emerging trend at Mayo Clinic to allow pets to visit patients nearing the end of their lives.

This recognition of the importance of pets to clients is essential for physicians as well as veterinarians, he notes.

“For economic survival, veterinarians need to be perceived as holders and respecters of the human-animal bond,” Creagan says.

Adam Hechko, DVM, owner and medical director of AAHA-accredited North Royalton Animal Hospital in North Royalton, Ohio, which was the 2015 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year, says his practice’s focus on fostering the human-animal bond is the reason for its success.

“It’s recognizing how important these pets are to us and that they’re more than just something that lives in the house. They’re family members,” Hechko says. “I treat each pet like my own.”

North Royalton Animal Hospital emphasizes fostering the bond between families and pets on its website, literature, and staff shirts, and walks the talk in daily activities as well as special events, including hosting an annual pet carnival and sponsoring a community dog agility course.

Hechko (pets: 14-year-old bichon frise, Maggie, and one-year-old vizsla, River) says end-of-life care is a crucial time for animal hospitals to respect and nurture the human-animal bond.

“One thing that I’ve always done in our practice is everything comes to a stop when a patient comes in for a quality-of-life discussion and end-of-life care. That patient gets our undivided attention. There are signs that go up in the office that it’s a quiet zone. The staff knows if that sign goes up, there’s no laughing—we’re a very fun office, but when that sign goes up, it’s quiet. The tone changes to more compassionate,” he says. “It’s a huge loss. And if we don’t recognize that loss, it’s more challenging to grieve.”

The practice has a comfort room for euthanasia with a private entrance, dim lighting, and soft music. Team members make a paw print whenever possible, and send flowers to every client who loses a pet. They also offer free monthly pet bereavement meetings.

“Fostering the human-animal bond is absolutely what this hospital has been built on, and what I will always

continue to focus on, and will never accept anything less,” Hechko says. “If I just walked into an exam and told somebody what they needed and walked out, it would not be a fulfilling job for me at all.”

Bob Vetere, president and CEO of APPA, says the increase in fiscal spending on the pet industry in America reflects a deepening of the human-animal bond. Pet owners spent \$17 billion on their pets in 1994, which rose to more than \$58 billion in 2014. Annual veterinary spending, not including prescription medications, was poised to reach \$15.7 billion at the end of 2015.

Vetere (pet: grey tabby Mr. Pepper, who will soon be joined by a canine companion) says times have changed since his childhood, when his beagle, Duke, lived outside in a doghouse.

“My golden retriever just passed away last year. Dakota ran the house. It was like I had to ask permission to come in,” he says with a laugh. “So, it’s that kind of humanization that has taken place more over the last 10 or 15 years that causes us to treat our pets like family members. On the veterinary level, it’s good news and bad news.”

Vetere says the good news is pet owners are more willing to spend money on veterinary care, including expensive procedures like hip replacements. But the bad news is treating a “family member” brings added responsibility. He hopes veterinarians will recognize this, and that veterinary schools will adapt by teaching ways to be sensitive when communicating with clients about a beloved pet or service animal.

“The veterinary field is very exciting to me. Honestly, I tip my hat to the way it’s changing and how much more important it’s becoming as a part of everybody’s life,” Vetere says. “By helping the animals, you’re actually helping human health.” ※



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder loved getting a hospital visit from a guinea pig named Sesame when she was recovering from surgery at age eight. Now, she pays it forward by visiting hospital patients with her certified therapy dog, Rio.