

Protecting the human-animal bond

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The lists of emerging diseases in pets and humans bear a striking resemblance. This is because many of these diseases are zoonotic, shared, or of “animal origin.” Thus, when looking at the veterinary profession’s readiness to address emerging diseases, it is important to view it from the perspective of our responsibility to both people and pets. Are we prepared? Will we be prepared? As a profession, we have a long history of ignoring reality and resisting change. If we continue to do so, we will miss the opportunities that are staring us in the face. Consider the following contemporary situations:

- Seventy percent of pet owners in the United States consider their pets as children, and more than 50 percent of pets share the bedroom/bed, according to 1995 American Animal Hospital Report. The family-pet bond has progressed to the point where pets truly share the same home environment as people.

- Local and state governments are considering legislation that would change the value of pets from just property to a higher status that would allow pet owners to be compensated for more than the fair market value of pets in cases of wrongful injury, veterinary malpractice or death. Owners will be able to sue for emotional distress.

- The aging human population, the increasing incidence of cancer and use of radiation treatment and chemotherapy, the spread of AIDS, and the increasing use of organ transplantation and

immunosuppressive therapy, are all contributing to an ever-growing population of immunocompromised individuals who are vulnerable to disease, including zoonotic disease.

- A March article in the *Houston Chronicle* has researchers criticizing the need for yearly vaccines for dogs and cats. They claim vaccines are “a waste of money and potentially dangerous.”

- The continued debate over the need for annual vaccines has divided the veterinary profession and spurred inaccurate information to seep into the hands of the media and cause pet owners to doubt practitioners and the need to vaccinate their pets. As a profession, veterinarians should demand that extensive field trials be conducted on vaccine efficacy to secure the trust of the pet-owning population rather than continue to allow misinformation to circulate.

These contemporary situations are all relevant to our profession’s state of preparedness for handling emerging diseases. These and other developments/attitudes are shaping the future of the veterinary practice and could determine which practices will thrive.

■ Professional obligation

Veterinary medicine has benefited greatly from the societal movement toward the strengthening bond between people and their pets. As pets achieve family member status, so does the level of care they receive. Many owners expect the same level of care for their pets as they expect for themselves. With the strengthening of the human-animal bond comes greater responsibility for the veterinarian. Veterinarians must now pay attention to the quality of the bond between people and their pets, and do their best to maximize it. This involves being an advocate for the animal, making sure that pets are properly trained and do not develop behavior problems that could erode the bond. Likewise, in-

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festation with fleas, ticks, mites and intestinal parasites, as well as ear infections, halitosis and periodontal disease can all cause the bond to deteriorate. They should be prevented. This calls for a major emphasis on wellness and disease prevention.

■ Welcome to the family

As pets share the home and family environment and are considered members of the family unit, they must not pose a threat to other family members through bad behavior or as a disease risk to the family. Whenever possible, diseases and infestations in animals that pose a direct or indirect zoonotic threat should be prevented. For example, flea infestation can facilitate disease transmission such as Bartonellosis; tick infestation can facilitate the spread of tick-borne diseases such as Lyme disease and ehrlichiosis; and helminth infestation can lead to larva migrans in functionally sensitive tissues. Vaccinating pets against diseases, such as giardia and leptospira, can reduce human environmental exposure to these pathogenic organisms. Pet vaccination programs also serve as a public health strategy to protect people from zoonotic and shared diseases. The best example of this strategy is rabies vaccination.

Practitioners who focus on the human-animal bond understand the responsibility they have to the family unit, and make recommendations with the family's best health interests in mind. Not only are they strong advocates for pets, but they are committed to enriching and protecting the quality of life for the entire family.

As pets are accorded family unit status and this is recognized in law, their 'value' will increase. This will impact the veterinary insurance industry, raise liability insurance costs, and demand more accountability from practitioners. Standard protocols, excellent records, current knowledge and skills, certification, quality assurance procedures, peer reviews will become mainstream as standards of practice become established and accepted.

The population of immunosuppressed/immunocompromised people is growing and will continue to grow. Veterinarians are usually unaware of this sta-

tus in their clients, and do not take this into consideration when addressing health issues in pets. However, now that animals share the family environment and are intimately in contact with family members, veterinarians must always be aware of public health issues. A recent survey of physicians and veterinarians in Wisconsin revealed that physicians expect veterinarians to be involved in zoonotic disease prevention, including patient education. The survey focused on the role physicians and veterinarians play in preventing zoonotic diseases in immunocompromised people. The results revealed a dramatic lack of awareness of responsibilities by both professional groups.

■ Planning for the future

For the future health of the veterinary profession, it is vital that we understand and accept responsibility for protecting pet owners from zoonotic and shared disease threats.

Vaccination is our most effective tool for preventing and controlling infectious diseases in people and in animals. However, there is now a growing belief among members of the public that vaccinating pets is not necessary and can be harmful.

The continued debate over the safety and need for annual revaccination has divided the veterinary profession and alienated many pet owners. Some well-meaning veterinarians and veterinary researchers are scaring the pet-owning population away from vaccination by contributing preliminary, unconfirmed or highly speculative opinions to the media. This causes many pet owners to doubt practitioners and the need to vaccinate their pets. Extensive field trials need to be conducted on vaccine efficacy and safety in support of the proposed vaccination protocol changes if we are to retain the trust of the pet-owning population. The recently-described resurgence of leptospirosis following a period of diminished commitment to vaccinate by some members of our profession is a timely warning for the need for field trials.

According to the CDC, Lyme disease is now endemic in the United States and is one of the fastest spreading diseases in man.

It is a shared disease rather than a zoonotic disease, but dogs can certainly act as a convenient reservoir of the causative agent, and a ready host for ticks. An effective vaccine is available to veterinarians for use in dogs.

Giardia is a major cause of intestinal disease in human infants and pets. It is viewed as an "emerging disease." In a 1999 study involving 7,500 pets from 15 regions of the United States, *Giardia lamblia* was found in 2 to 13 percent (average 6.9 percent). Close contact between infants (yet to develop hygienic habits) and pets is common, and transmission between pets and people has been established. A vaccine is available which effectively blocks cyst excretion in pets and thereby contamination of the home environment.

Vaccines could possibly be developed for other emerging diseases of humans such as Toxoplasmosis, Bartonellosis and Ehrlichiosis. Because each of these diseases has a zoonotic implication, it makes good public health sense (and economic and ethical sense) to vaccinate dogs and cats to remove the threat of disease. The new position of pets as family members, coupled with the veterinarian's responsibility to protect the family unit from the zoonotic nature of many of the emerging diseases constitutes a major opportunity for veterinary medicine. Practitioners need to embrace this responsibility by adjusting their standards of practice to provide high quality care to both patients and clients. **DVM**



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