Meeting pets’ needs

WHAT more can be done to encourage responsible pet ownership? The question arises following publication of the latest PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) report. The PDSA has been producing these reports each year since 2011, providing some useful insights into attitudes to pet health and wellbeing on the basis of surveys of UK pet owners and veterinary professionals. The report for 2014 was published last month and, while it indicates that progress is being made in some areas, it suggests that, in others, things are getting worse. As the charity remarked on publication of the report, the findings ‘have highlighted that the welfare needs of millions of UK pets are still being badly neglected – resulting in a nation of ill, lonely, aggressive, stressed and obese pets’ (VR, December 20/27, 2014, vol 175, p 605).

The report is based on the findings of a survey involving 1069 pet owners and 572 veterinary professionals that was undertaken by the market research company YouGov last autumn. One of its more worrying findings relates to pet owners’ understanding of their responsibilities under the 2006 Animal Welfare Act. This places a duty of care on pet owners to ensure that the welfare needs of their animals are met – in terms of environment, diet, behaviour, companionship and health. Nearly eight years after the Act came into force, one might have hoped that more owners would be aware of those needs, but this is not the case. The latest PAW report found that only 36 per cent of owners were familiar with the welfare needs set out in the Act, compared with the 45 per cent recorded in the first PAW report in 2011, and the 38 per cent recorded in 2013. The need to make sure that owners are aware of their responsibilities under the Act has been obvious ever since it came into force (VR, April 7, 2007, vol 160, p 455), so to some extent this finding isn’t altogether surprising. However, it does serve to emphasise that more effort needs to be devoted to this area.

Other worrying findings highlighted by the PDSA include the fact that pet obesity levels continue to rise, with 80 per cent of the veterinary professionals who took part in the survey believing that there will be more overweight than healthy pets in five years’ time and a similar proportion reporting that they had seen an increase in levels of pet obesity over the past two years. Discussing problem behaviours, it reports that 62 per cent of pet owners have been concerned or frightened by another dog’s behaviour and that over 30 per cent say they have been bitten or attacked by a dog.

Pet obesity, like obesity in people, is a complex issue, as a recent article in Veterinary Record’s One Health series made clear (VR, December 20/27, 2014, vol 175, pp 610-616), and this, too, is an area where more educational effort is needed. In the 2014 PDSA survey, equally high proportions of veterinary professionals and pet owners (about 95 per cent) agreed that owners have overall responsibility to learn about their pets’ dietary needs. However, 52 per cent of veterinary professionals, and 38 per cent of pet owners, felt that not enough information was available to help owners understand their pets’ dietary requirements. There clearly is a mismatch here that needs to be addressed.

The issue of problem behaviours and dog attacks is also complex, and has been well aired over the past 12 months, not least because of the publicity surrounding the introduction of new dangerous dogs legislation in England and Wales (VR, May 24, 2014, vol 174, p 514; October 25, 2014, vol 175, p 383). Observations in the PAW report that around 1.5 million dogs in the UK have not been properly socialised as puppies and that 54 per cent of dogs (about 4.4 million) have not attended training classes in their first six months of life are worrying in this context, and underline the need for a comprehensive strategy on dogs, as advocated in a report last month from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) (VR, December 13, 2014, vol 175, p 574).

The PAW report contains some useful statistics relating to preventive healthcare, including information on the proportions of cats, dogs and rabbits that are registered with a vet, along with the proportions being vaccinated, microchipped and neutered. It reports that more pets are being vaccinated and treated for fleas and worms than was the case in 2011, while also pointing out that this still leaves millions of pets unprotected. Although recording an increase in the proportions of dogs and cats that are microchipped, it also reports that only 66 per cent of dog owners are aware that microchipping will soon be compulsory in England and Wales. As in previous years, it found that many owners significantly underestimate the costs of keeping a pet, with a quarter of dog owners and a third of cat owners believing that their pets will cost no more than £1000 over their lifetime.

As the report makes clear, there is still much to do to improve the welfare of pets in the UK, and to make more owners aware of their animals’ needs. Education clearly has a crucial part to play in this, but, as the APGAW pointed out in relation to dogs in its report in December, a coordinated strategy would help. Meanwhile, as the Companion Animal Welfare Council pointed out five years ago, there is a need for more data on pet ownership and welfare (VR, February 7, 2009, vol 164, p 159). The Pets at Home and Vets4Pets group has also recently published reports containing statistics and information relating to pet ownership and welfare. Looking to the future, it might be useful if these and other data gathering exercises could be coordinated.


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