Today’s pets need strong vet voice

BUSY schedules, open-plan living and, often, a lack of space do not always offer the best environments for pets to live healthy and fulfilled lives.

At this week’s Animal Welfare Foundation discussion forum, these were just some of the aspects of modern living that were referenced during a debate on whether modern life is incompatible with pet ownership.

Vets and academics discussed the frequent mismatch between pet and owner needs as well as the role of vets in educating, intervening and taking a stand, where appropriate.

Many presenters used the five freedoms to demonstrate that all too often, pets’ basic needs are being denied.

Take domestic cats, for example. They have a need to be solitary and tend to prefer fleeting interactions with people, yet some owners often demand physical interaction with them for long periods, said Sarah Ellis of International Cat Care.

Cats are also territorial and prefer to stay in the same place, yet their owners often disrupt that by moving house frequently or taking them to a series of different locations, on holiday, for example.

And many domestic situations offer the exact opposite of what cats need in terms of their physical environment. Cats like to climb, hunt, hide and prefer their resources to be separated but they are often forced to live in small, open-plan homes with a cat zone, with food, water, bed and litter tray in one place.

This mismatch can be distressing, especially for cats who have lacked the crucial socialisation between two and seven weeks. Failing to meet these two welfare freedoms (the freedom from discomfort and the freedom to express normal behaviour) is likely to lead to unwanted behavioural problems, such as human-directed aggression and house soiling.

As vets will recognise, love for an animal does not necessarily equate to good animal welfare. Owners’ apparent love for dogs, for example, does not stop them failing to carry out the necessary research before getting a dog so they can understand its needs.

According to Rachel Casey of Dogs Trust, demand for puppies in the UK stands at around 600,000 per year. Due to a lack of responsible breeders, the shortfall in demand is being met by puppy suppliers from abroad and by irresponsible and unlicensed breeders in the UK, flooding the UK with unhealthy dogs.

Yet, against all expert advice, 25 per cent of owners find their breeder via the internet and up to 13 per cent of dog owners do no research before taking on a pet, according to the latest animal wellbeing report by the PDSA.

Dogs Trust has some worrying stories of puppies being delivered to people’s homes in boxes ‘Deliveroo style’ because owners prefer to ‘click and buy’ rather than meeting the owners and inspecting litters beforehand.

There is a significant educational challenge here - a need to educate people before they choose a pet. They need to know about the health risks of buying over the internet or of buying a brachycephalic dog or cat. We need, also, to build an understanding that pet ownership is a big commitment and requires matching – matching the needs of the animal to the needs of the owner. It’s a serious undertaking - a bit like adopting a child or finding a life partner.

Although animal charities are always on the lookout for celebrities to speak out on important animal welfare issues, it becomes difficult when celebrities have made the wrong decisions - take Ed Sheeran’s decision to get a Scottish fold cat, for example. Perhaps it is time to influence storylines in reality TV shows like ‘The Only Way is Essex’. These popular shows have the sort of reach that could make a real impact here.

On top of the educational challenges, there is a range of social needs in owners that can impact the welfare needs of a pet throughout its life. High rates of family breakdown, rising levels of loneliness, mental ill health and emotional instability mean pets plug an important gap for many people.

Emotional dependence on animals mean they can be over-loved and over-indulged and this, according to chief RSPCA vet James Yeates, can lead to problems like hoarding, obesity or failure to make responsible decisions, including euthanasia, where appropriate.

So how, in this complex matrix of unmet needs and emotions, can the vet hope to influence owners to make the right welfare decisions for their pets?

It is certainly a tough challenge. We know that clients are increasingly demanding and less loyal to a particular vet or practice than they once were. And even though 94 per cent of the public trust them, according to Vet Futures research, vets sense a growing lack of respect by the public for experts and an over-reliance on ‘Dr Google’.

Vets can retain their authoritative voice in three ways, the AWF meeting agreed.

First, advanced communication skills will put them at a distinct advantage. While vets already employ sophisticated communication skills in delivering, often, difficult messages to a range of clients, they will be advantaged by developing and investing in these important skills further.

Alison Bard, a PhD student from Bristol university, is testing out the benefits of using motivational interviewing techniques as a way of motivating cattle farmers to accept veterinary advice. While a directive approach can work in many situations, this particular interviewing approach is effective – and efficient – for clients who are ambivalent about making a choice. Early results show promise and this is the sort of tool that could be particularly beneficial in helping vets manage complex or chronic problems where client management is key; for example, in managing obesity.

Secondly, vets’ ability to foster and maintain honest and transparent relationships will be critical. Equine vets, for example, often have to manage an array of people — from difficult owners to farriers and trainers, who can all be intent on recommending particular treatment pathways, irrespective of veterinary advice.

But it is important for the profession to retain its expert voice - for vets to be clear that they are the only trained professionals equipped to treat and unpack complex ethical issues.

A third way vets can retain their influence is to hold their ground when it’s important to do so. Notwithstanding commercial pressures, they are the only professionals who can appropriately advise clients with the animal’s welfare as the primary concern.

As Roly Owers, from World Horse Welfare, reminded the audience, vets make a professional oath when they first register to practice, which places a fundamental duty on them to advocate for animals and their welfare needs ‘ABOVE ALL’.

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