Untapping the potential of pets

VETS already appreciate the huge contribution that companion animals make to our society and to our individual and collective wellbeing.

Pets offer a welcome escape after a stressful day at work, company when lonely and an opportunity to play and have fun, even as adults. That comfort spills over to those without pets – there is evidence to show that the whole community benefits when they can see dog walkers out and about, for example, because they share that sense of connectedness and feel safer.

The economic benefit pets offer is less well understood, but in a review recently published by the Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI), researchers calculated the economic benefit of companion animals (dogs and cats) to the UK. After deducting costs to the state – such as the £3 million spent by the NHS on treating dog bites each year – they calculated the net gain for the health service as £2.45 billion per year. And that was a conservative estimate.

This gain is found in savings drawn from a reduction in doctor visits due to improved health. Of course, this makes sense. We know that dog owners benefit from increased levels of activity from dog walking and an associated reduction in cardiovascular disease risk, for example, and they are less likely to be obese. Not only that, they gain from the improved social interaction that dog walking brings – something that has a positive impact on their mental health.

But researchers now believe that companion animals have yet more to offer us. At a CABI/Royal Veterinary College conference last week, we heard how researchers want to build a better human-animal bond.

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As a society, we certainly have significant challenges. In terms of health, we face growing rates of adult and childhood obesity, rising rates of mental ill health and dementia. In terms of social challenges, changing demographics due to an ageing population and the breakdown of the family unit, mean more people are living alone, some socially isolated and lonely.

Since pets are increasingly considered family members, researchers believe it is crucial to better understand the role they play in our lives and their potential to bring health and social benefit. It is for this reason that the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition has just invested $10 million into the field of human-animal interaction. Research projects currently underway are exploring how pets can help treat conditions as diverse as obesity, autism and post-traumatic stress disorder in children and adults.

The assistance dog charity Dogs for Good is currently supporting a number of pilot schemes in the UK to assess how dogs can help people and communities improve their lives. It is currently trialling dog-assisted rehabilitation at the national spinal injuries centre at Stoke Mandeville hospital, Buckinghamshire, for example. In a UK first, animal-assisted intervention (AAI) dogs are helping patients with physical rehabilitation needs build strength by performing particular exercises.

In another project, it is testing the use of specially trained dogs to help people with learning difficulties who require around-the-clock care. It is hoped that the pilot project will cut care time while helping residents build their confidence and live more independently.

Experts believe that dog-assisted intervention even offers the prospect of helping us tackle some of the difficult and longstanding social problems that cause people to become socially isolated, economically unproductive and, therefore, expensive to support.

If initiatives like these bring positive results, there will be a persuasive case for rolling out similar AAI schemes nationally. They could bring serious savings to our health and social care economies.

On a micro level, it is easy to understand the potential for saving money. Take this scenario – a school for children with learning disabilities usually takes four days to vaccinate 60 children because they get very anxious and need careful handling. Under an AAI project, the children were introduced to a dog called Berti and watched a film of him going to the vets to have his vaccinations. Subsequently, the children lined up calmly to have their jabs and it took a single day to administer them all. Scale that up to a national programme and that is a serious saving in terms of professional time alone.

There are signs that local authorities are beginning to wake up to this untapped resource. Of course, their familiar obsessions with dog fouling, control orders and restrictions on where dogs can walk remain, but some progressive councils are seeing the opportunity.

Melton Mowbray, for example, has become the UK’s first pet-friendly town. It is embracing dogs with the aim of making residents happier and healthier and improving footfall for businesses. Here, it is rolling out a series of initiatives to promote local businesses that are dog-friendly and encourage pet visits in care homes.

Wandsworth council has a dedicated animal welfare team that encourages responsible pet ownership and has set up a schools visit programme and runs courses in safety around dogs.

The emphasis cannot be all on what pets can bring us. It is important, say experts who work with assistance animals, that the needs of the animal are considered first – a stressed animal will simply not provide the focus or expected level of support.

There is no regulation around this, no definition of what an assistance animal is nor any official training requirement or standards. So vets have an important role here in terms of educating, advising on training, advocating the right approach so that animals, as well as people, benefit. They also have an opportunity to build support services and checkpoints into local authority plans.

At a time when social care budgets are under unprecedented pressure, the opportunity to bring health and social benefits and save cash at the same time is a win-win. So even though companion animals already make a significant contribution to our society, that contribution looks set to increase significantly. In the future pets could become more than our friends or family members but a precious resource – one requiring vets to safeguard their welfare on an even bigger scale.

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