Obesity – learning from the crisis in people

I RECENTLY participated in a roundtable discussion organised by *Vet Record*, the BVA and Mars Petcare about obesity in pets. My perspective was unusual; I have no pets and I am a dietitian who has worked in primary care and public health, primarily in the field of human obesity. But, as I was preparing for the meeting, I started thinking about the overlap between obesity in animals and people.

Obesity has been a serious health concern in people for several decades, and the current statistics, in both children and adults, are depressing. Unfortunately, nowadays it is more common for people to suffer from obesity or being overweight than to be a healthy weight; healthy weight is no longer 'normal' in the sense of being usual for adults. I hadn't realised, until the roundtable, that obesity was also such a concern in the animal world.

But as we talked, I realised that this means that vets have an opportunity to learn from what has worked and not worked for people.

We are making some progress in addressing obesity in people, but not a lot. We are genetically prone to gaining weight, so prevention is key. But that can be difficult when we look at our environment and how it encourages us to consume more than we need from foods and drinks, and to be sedentary. Just think about all the cues to consume that surround us; marketing, advertising and price promotions. Then there's the taste, smell and sight of foods and drinks which are prominently displayed, relatively cheap and supplied in large portion sizes. Just as in the case for children, the environment for pets is largely controlled by others, so education and behaviour of the owners needs to be prioritised.

The roundtable discussion suggested that there is a general lack of awareness among owners and many veterinary staff about obesity in animals and the implications of excessive body fatness for health. This is similar to what we see in people. Research has shown that parents are poor at recognising obesity in their own children. This is unsurprising since one in three children aged 10 to 11 years in England is now either overweight or obese. That means that when

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parents compare their own child to others, they are likely to be comparing their child to an overweight norm. Parents come under a lot of criticism when it comes to their children and obesity, but if they cannot see the problem, how can they address it?

Raising awareness is the first step, and that means healthcare staff have to have difficult conversations about a subject many are uncomfortable talking about. The same may be true for veterinary staff, but not mentioning a problem will not make it disappear. How the topic is raised, the words used and the tone in which they are spoken are all important.

Eating is about far more than nutrition or calories. It is about love, nurturing and acceptance and this is the same whatever species we are talking about. Parents of children with obesity worry about depriving them of foods and drinks they enjoy. 'Diet' is seen as a deficit; a deprivation and a privation. Who would wish that on a much-loved family member or pet?

How vets frame healthy eating and appropriate portion size to pet owners is likely to impact on their willingness to work with them to tackle the problem.

Exercise is the other part of weight management that needs to be addressed. Perhaps pet owners underestimate the calories consumed and overestimate the amount of exercise taken by their pets?

There is a lot of work to be done, but veterinary staff have the opportunity to learn from human healthcare professionals tackling the problem in people. Identifying a problem, raising the issue in a sensitive and non-judgemental way and working collaboratively with pet owners to help them understand why it matters is a key place to start.