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Animals, the Economy and Your Health



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We're all tied up in this together. That's the message **Dr. James Serpell** wants us to understand. Dr. Serpell is the Marie A. Moore Professor of Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare and director of Penn Vet's Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society. Dr. Serpell's research was one of the earliest to describe the beneficial effects of pet ownership on human health.

Clearly, the recession and global economic crisis has affected the lives of animals. From urban pugs to rural cattle, the economy is changing how, where and if animals live. When you think of the economy and animals, the first story that comes to mind is animals abandoned during the current recession. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals reports that animal abandonment is up over 58 percent in the United Kingdom since 2008. In the United States, stories abound about animals left at shelters or tied to signposts as people have lost their homes to foreclosure. "The biggest influx of animals into shelters correlates directly with the areas hardest hit by the financial downturn. Where people lose their homes, pets do, too," reports Dr. Serpell.

For many animals a lost home means they are given to or find their way to an animal shelter. **Dr. Michael Moyer**, Rosenthal Director of Penn Vet's Shelter Animal Medicine Program, notes that both animals and animal shelters are struggling. He communicates regularly with his

colleagues at shelters and in shelter medicine programs at other veterinary schools. “Shelters are busier and under greater pressures in a down economy. It isn’t a good situation for animals or those who care for them,” says Dr. Moyer.

Not all animals are fortunate enough to land in a shelter, and many of those that do are not adopted. Animals that are abandoned on the streets face serious health threats such as starvation, dehydration, exhaustion, fear and accidents. An animal may die from the stress of abandonment alone.

But even animals not abandoned are facing potential health risks because of the economy. According to recent statistics from the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues and a study by Brakke Consulting, a Texas-based animal health care management firm, small animal practice veterinarians reported a decrease in client visits in fall 2008 and reduced or flat transactions. These veterinarians also noted that more pet owners were choosing less-expensive treatments and either refusing or postponing non-essential services and diagnostic tests.

While business has been growing for **Charles Arensberg, V’03**—whose practice, Equine Veterinary Care, located at the Fair Hill Training Center in Elkton, MD, refers regularly to Penn’s George D. Widener Hospital for Large Animals in Kennett Square—there have been some changes. “I have seen some clients choose to forgo pre-purchase exams for middle or lower level horses,” reported Dr. Arensberg.

For the owner of Philadelphia’s Cat Doctor, **Diane Eigner, V’80**, a top referring vet to Penn’s Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital, while overall business is also growing, in elective areas, such as dentistry, people are delaying or declining some healthcare procedures. Payment has also changed. “We’ve seen a 100 percent increase in clients using CareCredit (a GE Money Company personal line of credit for healthcare treatments and procedures accepted by many veterinarians including Penn Vet). We’ve become more creative in finding ways to support and work with clients who are facing financial challenges,” reported Dr. Eigner.

There is, however, a story beyond the difficult choices owners are making about keeping and caring for their animals. Evidence suggests that owning dogs and cats makes great sense when it comes to human health—actually, big dollars and cents.

“As a society, we consistently underestimate the importance of our relationships with animals,” says Dr. Serpell. “It’s not just how much animals matter to us emotionally. They keep us healthier.”

Dr. Serpell’s findings have been echoed in other research throughout the world. A major study in Australia calculated

the number of doctor visits for pet owners versus non owners. Bruce Headey and colleagues at the University of Melbourne led the Australian National People and Pets Survey 1994 which documented how dog and cat owners made fewer doctor visits and appeared to have better health than non owners. The calculations indicated that the presence of pets saved the Australian government between \$790 million and \$1.5 billion. Benefits of owning pets and animals in general relate to both physical and mental health: getting more exercise, having companionship, being active caring for another being.

Using the Australian formula to calculate the potential benefits and applying it to the US population, we could be saving billions of dollars in annual healthcare expenditures. If animals do play a concrete role in keeping humans healthy, why don’t we focus on the economic benefits of animals? Dr. Serpell attributes this, in part, to the difficulty in calculating the benefits of pets in hard numbers. “It’s easy to quantify the costs and benefits of livestock. You can add it up. But assessing the value of companionship is really tough. Owning pets saves us vast

amounts of money but it’s money that we don’t see directly. Since it’s never used, its absence is never noticed,” Dr. Serpell says.

This positive benefit of pet ownership to owners’ health has been documented in China as well, according to a study published in *Social Indicators Research* in 2008. In China, pets were banned in urban areas until the early 1990s. This absence and resurgence provided a unique opportunity to evaluate pets’ impact on human health. The study

focused on whether owning a dog translated into better health. Results came from a survey given to more than 3000 women aged 25–40 in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Half the respondents owned dogs and half did not. As with the Australian study, pet owners experienced better health. Pet owners reported more frequent exercise, sleeping better, greater fitness and health, fewer days taken off from work due to illness and fewer visits to the doctor.

In an economic downturn, when people are giving up their pets, will there be a correlating cost to human as well as animal health? “We need to study the long term impact of animals on human health—beyond the existing studies,” says Dr. Serpell. We won’t know the true costs of the recession on humans or animals until we have a better understanding of their relationship to one another,” he says.

For more information about the work of Dr. Serpell and the Center for the Study of the Interaction of Animals and Society visit www.vet.upenn.edu/animalsandsociety. 

