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## From the Editor



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## Can pets help make aging better? What do we know and believe?



Across all settings of care we are increasingly focused on using and providing behavioral interventions to manage behavioral and psychological symptoms associated with aging and encourage and facilitate physical activity. The human–animal bond, defined as ‘a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors essential to the health and well-being of both’,<sup>1</sup> is one type of behavioral intervention that can be used to address these challenging clinical problems. With regard to physical health, there is some evidence that pet ownership, with the majority of the findings focused on pet ownership of a dog, result in increased time spent in physical activity including increased time in moderate level physical activity.<sup>2–4</sup> In addition, pet ownership has been associated with better cardiovascular health including the prevention of cardiovascular disease through management of hypertension and improvement in health following cardiac events,<sup>5,6</sup> decreased stress among older adults and improvement in behavioral and psychological symptoms associated with dementia.<sup>3,7</sup>

In addition to physical and psychological health, pet ownership has been noted to improve well-being for many older adults. For those living in the community, in a continuing care retirement community, or in assisted living facility, walking the dog results in interacting with others doing likewise or interacting with others who just want to pet the dog. This can lead to more formalized friendships and decrease loneliness. Having to walk the dog is also a terrific source of motivation to engage in regular physical activity, albeit at a relatively lower level of intensity than the required 30 min daily of moderate level physical activity recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine.

Even more important than the physical benefit associated with pet ownership is the psychological benefit of having a pet. Pet ownership provides older individuals with a sense of purpose and a reason to get up in the morning as there is someone that they need to feed, walk or care for in some way. This sense of purpose may be what helps decrease depression for older adults who are pet owners. The pet also provides structure for the day. Pet care can even be

associated with personal care activities such as needing to dress, to walk the dog or I have even heard from individuals that they link taking their medications to feeding their pet.

Nursing homes have had visiting pets since the 1980s, with an increasing percentage of facilities having formal programs arranged to assure these experiences for older adults. Visiting pets are also commonly noted in assisted living settings. There are some requirements around pet visits that vary state by state and may even vary by additional facility requirements. It is critically important we make these programs available and accessible to those who might benefit. Facilitating visits from family pets that the resident is no longer able to have in his or her room or apartment are another way to increase access to pets and so helpful for mood and overall quality of life.

Despite all the benefits associated with Human–Animal Interaction (HAI) for many individuals, possible risks should also be considered and managed by implementing preventive actions if possible. One of the most common risks associated with having a pet is falls. Falls associated with pet ownership or interactions occur due to tripping over the pet, getting pushed down by the pet, tripping over the pet or getting tangled in leashes when walking the pet, or simply falling when walking the pet due to outside risk factors such as uneven sidewalks or wet leaves or icy surfaces. There is also the risk of getting bitten or scratched by a pet which can result in a subsequent cellulitis or other possible animal acquired disease. There are some concerns about financial risks and older pet owners choosing to buy food for the pet versus their own food or medications. There is also the risk of grieving following the death of a pet. Conversely there is the risk of pet safety if the older adult becomes unable to care appropriately for the pet or if there is no backup plan of care for the pet when the older adult experiences an acute event and can't provide the necessary pet care.

In my own clinical work in a continuing care retirement community I have repeatedly seen the value of pet ownership for so many residents and have worked with residents through having to give up a pet or suffer through the death of pet. The pets residents have are

generally shared throughout the community in that independent residents will bring their pets to visit residents in the nursing home or assisted living setting and other independent residents who no longer have pets of their own often serve as dog walkers or sitters. We have had community pets as well including a much loved rabbit which served as a great source of enjoyment and provided a sense of purpose to many residents living in assisted living. The residents participated in the feeding, combing, holding and cleaning of the rabbit and his cage.

There has been some increased support for research in the area of HAI from WALTHAM™ Centre for Pet Nutrition, part of Mars Petcare, and through partnerships with the National Institutes of Health and The Gerontological Society of America. We need to continue to explore the benefits of HAI for older adults, consider how to deliver animal-assisted interventions across all settings of care, gain an understanding of who is most likely to benefit from HAI, and consider and test ways to disseminate and implement HAI across a variety of clinical settings.

Recently the Gerontological Society of America partnered with the WALTHAM™ Centre for Pet Nutrition, part of Mars Petcare, to review what is currently known in the area of HAI and developed a publication, *The Role of Pets in Human Healthy Active Aging*.<sup>8</sup> This publication provides an overview of the risks and benefits associated with HAI. The publication addresses the role of pets in physical, emotional and social well-being including papers that discuss physical activity and mobility, mood, and engagement as well as the economic impact of pets. Pet ownership risks and challenges including papers that focus on falls, bites, other diseases, housing issues, loss and subsequent grief, and concerns for the pet when an older adult is providing the care (e.g., space and exercise opportunities). There is a section in the publication that addresses ways to optimize opportunities for HAI for older adults through financing, housing, and interaction opportunities without owning the pet. Lastly there are several papers on HAI interventions specifically focused on addressing depression and

cognitive impairment and use of HAI in long term care settings. I encourage you to review this publication and help your residents and patients experience the joy of animal interaction safely and effectively.

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