



Pet Ownership may address Community Health Crisis

Pet ownership combined with pet friendly urban planning may help to address urgent social issues of poor mental health, social isolation, obesity and depression. The emerging research was revealed at the recent People, Pets and Planning Symposium held at Deakin University.

An international first, the symposium brought together over a dozen academics and experts who presented research demonstrating the beneficial relationship between companion animals (particularly cats and dogs), social trust and social capital.

Social Capital

While previous research relates to the individual benefits of pet ownership, new research suggests that there are collective benefits for communities via the presence of pets, extending well beyond pet owners themselves.¹

Dr Lisa Wood, a research fellow of The University of Western Australia, has been investigating the relationship between pets, social capital, neighbourhood environments and health as part of a larger study being conducted in Perth. Her research concludes that:

- 84% of pet owners spoke with other pet owners when walking their dog
- 50% of dog owners got to know others as a result of their dog
- 70% pet owners rarely or never felt lonely
- 74 % pet owners rarely or never found it hard meet others
- 60% of pet owners were more likely to be actively engaged in community activities

“Social capital can take many forms,” said Dr Lisa Wood. “It can be as simple as the lending of a cup of sugar or as inspired as a community rallying towards a common cause. In simple terms, it behaves as the social glue or fabric of our communities. Our research appears to show that pets are playing a vital role in its continued health and development.”

“Overall,” she said “pets’ help people meet each other, chat together and enjoy each other’s company. All of which goes a long way towards building happier, healthier neighbourhoods.”

Urban Planning

Professor Billie Giles-Corti, a Professor at the University of Western Australia, has been examining the effects that urban planning has on social capital.

Her research, taken over a five year period, reveals that neighbourhoods designed with attractive, pet friendly, walkable streets may in fact be helping create effective social networks while concurrently addressing the nation’s obesity epidemic.

“Urban design that plans for community needs and networks,” said Professor Giles-Corti “will encourage people to walk up to *three times more* than those neighbourhoods characterised by poorly connected streets and inaccessible shops and services.”

Ms Virginia Jackson, a town planner and leading authority on the place of pets in city environments, also spoke at the symposium. Presenting research accumulated over years working with national organisations, Ms

¹ Wood, L., Giles- Corti, B, & Bulsara, M. (2005). The pet connection: Pets as a conduit for social capital? *Social Science & Medicine*, 61, 1159-1173.

Jackson voiced concerns over urban consolidation and pet ownership regulations, regarding them as potential threats to the benefits of companion animals.

While two thirds of Australian households currently own pets, statistics from a 2006 Australian Companion Animal Council report show that pet numbers in Australia are in decline.

“If we want people to continue enjoying the benefits of pet ownership,” said Ms Jackson “then it is vital that in planning our domestic *and* public spaces, we genuinely consider pet and pet owners needs.”

“If we choose to ignore these needs, there is a very real danger that pet ownership will become an option enjoyed only by the elite few.”

Faye Gravenall, the President of the Eltham Recreational Walkers Group supported Jackson’s words. In presenting the local stories of dog walkers in her area, Faye illustrated the tangible social support that the elderly and the vulnerable found through their daily dog walking activities.

“Dog walkers may not dress in Lycra or wear team colours,” said Ms Gravenall “but we’re just as vital and important to the health of a community as any other group and we need our requirements to be respected.”

Health

With 70% of males and 52% of females classified as overweight or obese in Australia, heart disease and diabetes is taking on alarming proportions in the country’s population.

Since the Baker Institute research of 1992 concluded that pet owners had lower levels of risk factors for cardiovascular disease, researchers have continued in their efforts to study companion animals and their resultant health benefits.

The first study that set out to explore the relationship between a parent and child’s physical activity (PA) levels and dog ownership was presented at the symposium by Dr Jo Salmon, a senior research fellow at Deakin University, Melbourne.

After studying 1200 parents and children across Melbourne, Dr Salmon found that those who owned dogs had significantly higher PA levels than those that did not.

According to the results younger girls that walked dogs exercised 29 minutes more on average than those who did not. Similarly, mothers that walked dogs were 70% more likely to meet exercise guidelines than otherwise.

Hayley Cutt, an Associate Lecturer at the University of Western Australia, has developed a study measuring the health and social implications of dog walking in the community. She delivered the results at the symposium.

“The DAPA Study (Dogs and Physical Activity Study) plainly shows that those who own dogs receive a broad array of physical benefits,” said Ms Cutt “including increased cardiovascular health, lower blood pressure and fewer visits to the GP.”

And while just 45% of Australians achieve the sufficient amount of physical activity, 80% of dog owners manage to achieve the recommended levels.

Conclusion

Current community health priorities in developed countries include physical inactivity, obesity and mental health. Overlaying these individual health issues however are worldwide concerns about the social determinants of health and the erosion of social capital.

The results of the research presented at the symposium suggest that pets have the potential to play an important role in addressing these concerns. With pet ownership rates at more than 60%, the window of opportunity to do so is wide open.