

# Healthy Pets and Happy People

**O**ur pets are so important to us in so many ways that it is little surprise to us that their health and well-being are integrally involved in our happiness. The closeness of the bond that develops between people and their pets has an intensely powerful benefit for our pets and us. When our pets are healthy and well behaved they are a pure pleasure. We enjoy their presence, and it is no surprise that 2004, 63 percent of United States households owned a pet. Pets are an integral part of American lives; many families think of and even speak of their pets as members of the family.

This special bond between people and their pets is what has made it so rewarding for us to practice veterinary medicine at what I have come to call “the family practice for your pet”. We have spent 27 years caring for pets and their human families. The depth of the interrelationship between pets and people never ceases to amaze us. We have seen people connect more fully with the loss of a pet than with the loss of a human friend. We have seen people thrilled at the prospect of saving a lost kitten or adopting a new dog.

## **Our Pets and Our Health**

There are many health benefits to owning a pet. Petting a cat can lower a person's blood pressure, walking everyday with a dog can help one lose weight, have a healthier heart and control blood sugar levels. Animal companions may help us heal from illness. Deeply withdrawn patients in nursing homes or hospitals have rejected human contact only to brighten at the arrival of a therapy dog. Often that dog is the bridge that allows our physician colleagues to reach their patients and begin their therapeutic course. Even at the most basic level a pet is able to be the presence waitin in an otherwise empty home or apartment. Cats and dogs never seem to be judgment about our motivations or even our actions. How quickly we are forgiven for stepping on a foot or coming home late from work!

## **When a Pet is Sick**

When the bond between people and their pets is hindered by pet health or behavior problems, the relationship suffers to the detriment of both parties. Having to bear the emotional strain of worrying if a beloved pet can survive a disease or injury causes stress for us.

Part of our relationship with our pets is the responsibility we must take for them. The value of what some people consider “just an animal” is totally dependent upon the way we treat our pets. At the Durham Veterinary Hospital we try never to refer to a dog or cat as an animal. That diminishes the value of a pet who has a family to love and care for him or her. Because he or she is part of a family, the pet is not property to be treated at best like an inanimate object or at worst with neglect or lack of

compassion. The most fortunate animals have people who elevate them from “just an animal” to being a part of the family unit where they receive good food, shelter and medical care.

### **A Lifetime of Care**

Our veterinary health care team recognizes how important pets are to their people because we all have pets of our own. Among our ten member hospital family we count dozens of dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, fish and even snakes as part of our extended families (see them in our gallery!). As health care providers our care focuses on the feline and canine members of the human families who seek our care. We try to make the pet and human bond as strong and healthy as it can be by intervening at all levels, from the time before a pet is added to a family, through the early period of establishing a sound preventive medical program, maintaining good health by designing programs for optimal nutrition, dental health, early disease detection, and successful intervention when illness or injury occurs.

Even in the sunset years of a long and loving life we must care for the pets and their people. One of the most trying experiences we face is the fact that our generations will far outnumber those of our pets. The help I can extend to a family when I can no longer extend help to their pet is often the most memorable interaction I have with the family. When we have done all we can for the pets in their lives we turn to helping the pets pass gently from a time of pain and loss of quality of life so that their people can know they have given the best care right up to the last best thing they can do for their friend.

Our dedication to making pets lives happier and healthier makes it easier for their people to love them and give them the care they deserve. Getting mad at a dog who tears up a pillow because he suffers separation anxiety is no help to anyone. Developing a strategy of behavior modification to correct the bad acts leaves everyone happy and harmonious. When a cat with a urinary tract infection or diabetes misses the litter box, it is not the cat's fault that the carpet is soiled but rather the fault of the disease. Preventing such diseases, detecting them early, and correcting them is the service we can extend towards the happy relationship between our patients and their families.

The chapters that follow examine many of the ways in which we can work together with people to make their pets healthy and their families happy with their pets. A deep commitment to treating pets as individuals with a unique personality is felt by all of us at the Durham Veterinary Hospital. Often it is lessons learned with our own pets that help us to make the lessons we learned in school or technical training effective for each of our patients. It is my deepest wish that our care for your pets will help them to live long and productive lives as members of your family.

*-Dr. Levy, Dr. Kumar, and the Staff at Durham Veterinary Hospital*