CHAPTER 33

Human–animal interaction – the place of the companion animal in society

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Key Points

- The domestication of dogs and cats was a natural progression from man's need for help with guarding, hunting and the herding of livestock and the animal's need for shelter and protection from predators.
- The possession of a companion animal can have a beneficial effect on health, child development and helping elderly people to cope with retirement and loss of a spouse.
- Companion animals are widely used to provide therapy in prisons, schools, hospitals and hospices.
- Nowadays dogs play an essential role in sport and in the service of man.
- Civilized society is based on the fundamental principle that where animals are used to accommodate human needs, their welfare is of paramount importance.
- Responsible pet ownership is designed to produce an animal that is healthy and well trained and causes no problems to the society and the environment in which it lives.
- Pet abuse is an increasingly common problem and may lead to abuse of family members.
- Euthanasia is a difficult decision and an emotionally testing time for the client. It is at this time that the veterinary nurse plays a vital role in supporting both the veterinary surgeon and the client.

Introduction

Interaction between domestic animals and humans has existed throughout history but it is only within the past 30 years that we have begun to understand the importance of the human–animal bond and how it can influence our society. Research in this field is still in its infancy but many benefits of pet ownership have been proved scientifically. While human–animal interaction does not yet rate highly on the student veterinary nurse's syllabus, it is a subject that is invaluable to those working in practice and in other areas of veterinary medicine. This knowledge will enable veterinary nurses to understand the specific needs of each patient as well as the owner and, consequently, will help to improve the relationship between the practice and the client.

Domestication – How did the wild animal become a pet?

Some people believe the nurturing instinct of the early hunter-gatherers caused them to take the orphans of their prey back to the women to be nursed and, as a result, some animals became tame. Others consider that it was a natural progression from animals being domesticated for utilitarian purposes. Whichever way it came about, it is certain that man and beast formed a symbiotic relationship. Man had the advantage of using animals for transport, security, hunting and keeping down rodent populations, while animals had an easy meal ticket within a community that could also provide them with shelter and protection against predators. As time progressed, animals became more adapted to man's purpose through genetic selection.

Pets have only been referred to as 'companion animals' within the past three decades and it would be reasonable to assume that this new terminology reflects the changing role of domestic animals in modern society. Over 50% of households within the UK now own pets and the vast majority of these animals are kept as companions (Robinson 1995); however, the true reason for introducing the expression 'companion animal' is the belief that the term 'pet' is demeaning (Tannenbaum 1995). The concern for political correctness demonstrates our changing attitude towards animals by suggesting that pets have sensitivities similar to our own. This belief is a far cry from the view of the philosopher Descartes (1596–1650), who decreed that animals had no capacity for reason and therefore could not feel (Dolan 1999).

The concept of keeping animals as companions is not new. There is proof in surviving epitaphs that the ancient Greeks and Romans were avid pet owners and that they revered their pets for their ability to reciprocate affection and provide amusement and companionship. Unlike many other societies, pet owners were from every type of social background rather than being confined to the elite (Bodson 2000). Ancient Egyptian murals depict the enthusiasm that Pharaohs and other high-ranking officials had for keeping dogs, cats and other wild creatures as objects of affection (CSS 1988). In fact, it was thought that the domestic cat originated in Egypt, but archaeologists have since discovered the

bones of a cat in Cyprus that are over 9000 years old and all the evidence points to it having been a pet (Muir 2004).

Chinese emperors were reported to have kept pet dogs as early as the 12th century and by the 18th century it was not unknown for puppies to be suckled by human 'wet nurses' and, as adult dogs, to be attended by their own retinue of palace eunuchs (Robinson 1995). This attitude towards dogs was not upheld by the rest of the Chinese population, who were more likely to use dogs for guarding, hunting and as a food source.

In the Western world, during the Middle Ages, animals were considered to be totally utilitarian and any sentiment shown towards them was frowned upon. During the 16th and 17th century, companion animals were cited as evidence of witchcraft. The animals that were thought to be kept as 'familiars' during this period were frequently owned by elderly women who were socially deprived, thus suggesting that in reality these pets were kept for companionship (Robinson 1995). The indications are that dogs gradually worked their way into the affections of humans as a result of their working relationship as hunting dogs, but it is unlikely that they were bred as pets until relatively modern times. During the 18th century, the custom of keeping animals as companions was recognized in the Western world, but this practice was confined to wealthy citizens who could afford to keep non-working animals and were prepared to ignore the common view that showing affection towards animals was both unnatural and immoral. Pet-keeping became fashionable in the Victorian period as a means of getting in touch with the natural world; however, there was little regard for animal welfare at this time and the development of new breeds, for example, is a visible demonstration of man's dominion over nature (Webster 1994, Robinson 1995). Some dogs such as pugs and King Charles spaniels were bred to elicit the 'cute response' and have a paedomorphic appearance to appeal to people's innate parental instinct (Serpell 2003); others were bred simply to achieve a look that was fashionable.

Intensive breeding over subsequent years has resulted in a loss of fitness and in 1994 Bonner reported that genetic disease in pedigree dogs was affecting approximately 142 breeds out of the 170 that were then registered with the UK Kennel Club. A controversial documentary 'Pedigree Dogs Exposed', shown on the BBC in 2008, brought the effects of unhealthy breeding programmes to the nation's attention. As a result several sponsors of the annual dog show, Crufts, which is run by the Kennel Club, withdrew their support and in 2009 the BBC refused coverage of the show for the first time in 40 years. From a positive aspect, the Kennel Club reviewed the breeding policies to ensure that all dogs are fit for their original function and none should be bred from close relatives (Kennel Club 2009, Khan 2009). Unfortunately it will take several years before the new breed standards will truly take effect.

Historically cats appear to have suffered less at the hands of man; although, over the last 30 years, obesity has become an increasing problem due to a number of factors that include overfeeding of pet foods with a high fat content, lack of activity where owners tend to reward with food rather than play and neutering (German and Martin 2009). Prior to being companion animals, the cat's main function in society was to control the rodent population; thus, no genetic modification was required. Differences in cat species tend to relate to the country from which they come. For example, British short-hair cats are stockier and have thicker coats, whereas those from warmer countries, such as the Siamese, tend to be more slender with long legs and thin tails. This complies with the Darwinian theory of natural selection that species become adapted to their environment. It was not until the 19th century that cats were differentiated into breeds and, following the first cat show held at the Crystal Palace in 1871, standards of excellence were introduced (Thorne 1992).

Table33.1 Reasons for pet-keeping, related to species

Reason	Species
Decoration	Exotic birds, tropical fish, goldfish, koi carp
Breeding and showing	Dogs, cats, horses, budgerigars – most pet species may be involved
Hobby	All pet species
Child's 'toy'	Ponies, small rodents, rabbits, guinea pigs, goldfish, terrapins
Adult's 'toy'	Horses, dogs, cats, rats, rabbits
Sport	Dogs, horses, pigeons
Status symbols	Rare and expensive breeds of cat and dog, exotic reptiles, tarantulas
Companionship	Dogs, cats, horses, parrots, budgerigars, rabbits and other small rodents
Helpers	Working and service dogs
Money-makers (illegally or legally)	Dogs, cats and exotic species

The advances that have been made in veterinary medicine, the increase in the number of pet insurers, the growth in the pet food industry and the demand for animal behaviourists, personal trainers and alternative therapists suggest how greatly humans value their pets in the present day (Blacker 2004). Domestic animals still have a variety of roles (Table 33.1) but the modern world dictates a greater need for animals to be kept solely as companions. The contributory factors to this requirement are the breakdown of the family unit, a stressful lifestyle and the fact that more people live alone. For many years pet owners have eulogized the virtues of their animals but it is only recently that scientists have been able to prove that companion animals are beneficial to human health and well-being.

Beneficial effects of keeping companion animals

The effect on human health

It is a popular misconception among non-pet-owners that people who keep pets are socially and emotionally inept, but studies have revealed that the majority of pet owners are normal people whose social skills are enhanced by keeping animals. The observation that animals facilitate communication with strangers (Hunt et al 1992) is a point that can be

Fig. 33.1 Pets encourage their owners to interact socially with other humans

endorsed by anyone who has walked a dog in a park in London, a city renowned for its unfriendliness (Fig. 33.1). In most cases, it is the common interest of pet ownership that will trigger interaction, but evidence that a pet can significantly reduce anxiety suggests that this might inspire pet owners with the confidence to socialize more freely.

Scientific research has established that pet owners not only have fewer minor health problems and visit doctors less but also they have a higher rate of survival following coronary heart disease. The most obvious health benefit to dog owners is that they are motivated to take regular exercise out of duty to their pet. However, the benefits of pets to human health are not just limited to dogs and at a nursing conference held in May 2004 (Frith 2004), cats, ferrets and parrots were included in a request by a psychologist to make registered pets available on prescription to those recovering from serious illness or surgery. Research presented by McNicholas at the Royal College of Nursing Conference (Frith 2004) showed that women recovering from breast cancer were significantly better at managing their disease if they owned a pet and felt less disfigured following surgery. The psychological benefits of animals to humans are that they are aesthetically pleasing, they instigate a nurturing instinct in man and respond readily to human affection, all of which help to reduce stress and promote feelings of self-worth.

It is now recognized that animals can induce physiological benefits in humans. When people become upset or anxious the body responds with the 'flight or fight' mechanism. This activates the sympathetic nervous system, increases blood pressure, heart and respiratory rate and induces hormonal changes. The theory that the presence of a friendly animal has a positive effect on cardiovascular response has been examined in a number of ways. One research project measured the blood pressure and heart rate of children while they rested and then while they read aloud both with and without a friendly dog present (Friedman 1995). The results showed that the presence of the dog had a significant effect on lowering blood pressure. Similar research conducted on college students revealed that a dog had a considerable influence on reducing heart rate (Friedman 1995). One of the problems that arises in research on pets and cardiac response is that not all individuals feel the same level of comfort from animals, either because of their background or previous experience, and when subjects use their own dogs in research they are more stressed because they have to control their pet in a laboratory situation; however, despite the early criticism of research in this field, many more health authorities are promoting the use of animals in the treatment of the sick and convalescent patient.

Human health has been severely compromised by the modern lifestyle and has led to an increase in obesity, mental illness, alcohol dependence and drug addiction, all of which put a greater pressure on our economy. Some areas of research are directed towards ways of improving well-being and it is now widely recognized that companion animals can be of great benefit to man by reducing stress and increasing physical activity (Delta Society 2009).

The effect on child development

Veterinary nurses can ensure that pet ownership is a beneficial experience for children by educating the parents about the needs of a chosen pet, suggesting suitable preventative treatments and encouraging families to take part in puppy and kitten classes. Veterinary nurses should have the capacity to be informative about the stages at which children are able to take on certain responsibilities of pet ownership and should advise parents of the dangers of leaving a young child with a pet unsupervised. The veterinary nurse may sometimes be required to give advice to parents on how to help their child cope with pet bereavement.

Many parents must be grateful to their pets for providing sex education for their children without causing them too much embarrassment, but pets can be educational in other life experiences too. Often children experience bereavement for the first time through the loss of a pet and, so long as the child is allowed to work through the grieving process, this can provide a balanced approach to coping with the deaths of close relatives or friends that may occur in the future. A greater sense of nature can be learned through

Fig. 33.2 Regular interaction with a pet helps a child to develop awareness of the needs of others

owning companion animals, and children will have a better understanding of welfare that can be applied to all animals and not just pets.

According to Endenburg and Baarda (1995), pet ownership encourages the development of social and emotional skills and may enhance cognitive and learning powers in children (Poresky and Hendrix 1988). By helping to care for a pet a child can acquire nurturing skills and, when praised by an adult for performing a task well, will build up self-esteem. However, it is important that a child is supervised in the care of pets and is never given a task beyond the capabilities of its age. Fogle (1983) suggests that 10 years is the minimum age that a child can be expected to fully take care of an animal. An interesting study using child-friendly methodology allowed children aged 7–8 to rate the importance of pets in their most special relationship. Pets were often rated more highly than humans as providers of comfort, for maintaining self-esteem and as confidants of secrets. The reliability of this data was supported by the fact that pets were not nominated for the tasks impossible for them to perform. Pets have an important function in the affection they can return but they should only be considered as part of a support network (Endenburg and Baarda 1995).

Through regular interaction with a pet, a child will develop an awareness of the pet's needs and, while this may be criticized for being of an anthropomorphic nature, it has been noted that children who own pets have a greater empathy for the emotional and physiological needs of fellow human beings (Fig. 33.2). It is believed that pets can influence cognitive development because they are willing and patient listeners and are attractive verbal stimuli.

Statistics show that the percentage of households with pets is significantly higher in families with children from the age of 6–15 years (Bonas et al 2000). Cats and dogs are often considered as family members and will instigate more social interaction within the home. The number of family households with pets may also be synonymous with the number of families in which both parents work and, in this case, an animal can provide company for children and a feeling of security when they are alone in the house.

It has been observed that most pet-owning adults have had companion animals as children and it would be safe to assume that this has been the case for most veterinary nurses. The benefits to children derived from pet ownership are entirely dependent on the responsibility of the parent and negative learning can result from the parent being unwilling or unable to supervise the welfare of the animal. A child might learn to fear certain species either through a bad experience of their own or through experiencing a parent's fear of an animal. Fear, deferred anger or the imitation of adults may lead to the abuse of animals and it is the role of people in the veterinary profession and those working in animal welfare to educate families in responsible pet ownership.

Children and bereavement

Some parents want to shield their children from the trauma of pet loss but generally it is believed that withholding information or an untruthful explanation of the pet's sudden disappearance will cause confusion and anger and may lead to serious mental health problems (McNicholas and Collis 1995, Stewart 1999). When a pet is seriously ill, the child should be made aware of what is happening and be prepared for its imminent death. Sometimes a child will want to be present at euthanasia but this will be at the discretion of the veterinary surgeon and the parents; however, a child should be encouraged to see the pet after it has died to show that it is at peace and will not return. Euphemisms such as 'put to sleep' should be avoided as this may lead to misconception and allow the child to believe that their pet will wake up. Children's reaction to bereavement can be similar to that of the adult and they should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and share their grief. Allowing children to perform or take part in some kind of ritual such as burial, a memorial service or helping to make a decision about the ashes is also beneficial. A sensitive and honest approach in connection with a pet's death will help children take a balanced approach to future losses and will increase their trust in their parents and other adults who have been involved.

Benefits to elderly people

The positive effects that pets have on human health can be applied to all age groups but perhaps the greatest benefit that companion animals bring to the elderly is their ability to help them cope with loss. Loss refers not only to the death of close relatives or friends but also to the loss of a job following retirement and the loss of children once they have left home. The bereavement of a spouse can include the loss of a confidante and possible social isolation, thus compounding the effect of prolonged stress. Investigations into the effects of bereavement on the elderly have shown that pet owners suffered significantly less depression than those without pets (Hart 1995). Job loss and the lack of having someone to nurture are factors known to cause low self-esteem and pets can play a vital role in fulfilling the need to nurture and giving reassurance of self-worth (Enders-Slegers 2000).

A dog will encourage its owner to take regular exercise, which is of great value to cardiovascular health, and now research has revealed that exercise plays a major role in avoiding hip fracture (Hart 1995). It has been said that pets encourage social interaction with other humans but this is not necessarily exclusive to pet ownership. Simply being an

animal lover can help to forge relationships with other enthusiasts. An investigation carried out in old people's homes discovered that pet visitation greatly improved social discourse among the residents and elicited bonding with the volunteers who had brought the animals. Surprisingly, the animals were not the main focus of attention but their presence appeared to encourage the residents to share personal information about their past and present lives by recreating a domestic environment (Hart 1995).

People who do not like animals will gain nothing from their presence, but there are many other practical reasons why the elderly do not keep pets. Some elderly fear abandoning a pet through illness or death or are concerned about not being able to cope with the loss of yet another pet. Others worry about the extra work a pet can create and a lack of financial resources. Residential homes in particular often do not allow their patients to keep pets but there is a growing awareness of the needs of the elderly and the benefits of companion animals and many homes allow therapeutic visits from volunteers with friendly pets. An organization, the Cinnamon Trust, was formed to assist the elderly in looking after their pets in their own homes. The aim is to preserve the relationship between owners and their pets by providing practical help to care for the animal through a network of volunteers. For example, a volunteer may walk the dog of an owner who is housebound. Foster homes will take care of an animal whose owner faces a spell in hospital and the owner is kept in touch with their pet through visits, photographs or letters. Elderly people become lonely and depressed when a pet dies but, by replacing it with a bereaved pet from one of the Cinnamon Trust sanctuaries, a very special new bond can be formed.

The therapeutic effect of companion animals

The idea that animals can be of therapeutic value to man dates back through history. In the 18th century a tea merchant named William Tuke, who had been appalled by the treatment of mentally ill patients in asylums, founded an establishment in York where patients were motivated into caring for rabbits and chickens. Florence Nightingale in 1859 advocated chronically ill patients keeping pets, particularly birds, and, if well enough, being encouraged to feed and clean them. A small town in Germany, Bethel-Bielefeldt, witnessed the opening of a residential centre for epileptics in 1867 in which animals were an integral part of the treatment. This home was still in existence in the 1970s, by which time it had expanded to accommodate 5000 physically and mentally handicapped patients and the animals included pets, horses, farm animals and a safari park. During the First and the Second World Wars (WWI and WWII), the therapeutic effect dogs had on servicemen who had been injured, shell-shocked or traumatized was recognized in some hospitals. In Norway, Erling Stordahl and his wife Anna opened a rehabilitation centre in 1966 where the disabled were able to take part in sport and physiotherapy programmes and dogs and horses were an integral part of their treatment. Erling Stordahl would have been particularly aware of the benefits, as he was blind himself.

The true founder of pet-facilitated therapy, as we know it today, was Boris Levinson, an American child psychologist. He discovered, apparently by accident through his own pet dog, Jingles, that children who were emotionally disturbed and withdrawn would respond favourably to the presence of a dog when previously they had been hostile and uncommunicative. His reasoning was that companion animals could act as catalysts by stimulating playful and non-threatening social contact and providing a neutral vehicle for expressing worries and concerns. Levinson made a plea for others to explore the efficacy of pet therapy and, although he was met with reluctance in some quarters, many of his theories were supported by subsequent research.

By the 1980s the use of pets in therapy had become much more sophisticated and therapists had begun to develop their skills and to become more specialized. Pets as therapy or pet-facilitated therapy was compartmentalized into two main categories, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activity (AAA). The difference between these two areas can best be described in the form of a flow chart (Fig. 33.3).

Companion animals in prisons

When animals were experimentally introduced into a maximum-security mental institution in Ohio, the organizers were amazed at the results. There was a much lower incidence of violence and suicides in wards that had pets than in those that did not; also the need for tranquillizing drugs was far less (CSS 1988). The pets used in this experiment were mostly birds, fish and small rodents. The effect that these animals have in reducing stress has since been recognized as passive animal-assisted activity. The activity of birds and fish, their colours and the sounds they create have been found to have a calming influence and are now used to great effect in many veterinary, dental and medical surgery waiting rooms. Since the success of introducing small pets into prisons, other pet-related schemes have been devised, giving prisoners an opportunity to take a more active role in caring for animals, thus enabling them to learn new skills. A programme initiated at a women's prison in Washington has taught prisoners how to train dogs to assist the physically handicapped. The dogs used are frequently strays provided by the local humane centre. Once the prisoners have become accomplished dog trainers, they work with a disabled person to find out exactly what their specific needs are and train the dogs accordingly (CSS 1988). Clearly, this is a programme that benefits everyone.

Companion animals in schools

In discussing pets as therapy, one tends to relate to the health-giving aspects alone, but pets have also been found to have a therapeutic effect in education. Researchers in Austria discovered that the presence of a dog in a primary school class helped disruptive children to concentrate more on their lessons and to become less boisterous and attention seeking (Le Fevre 2004). A wide range of animals, including dogs, ponies and even pigs, have been introduced into schools for children with autism and severe learning difficulties. As well as being educational in terms of learning about body parts and nature, these animals have brought many psychological benefits by improving self-esteem, teaching nurturance and inducing a more empathic attitude towards other peoples' needs.

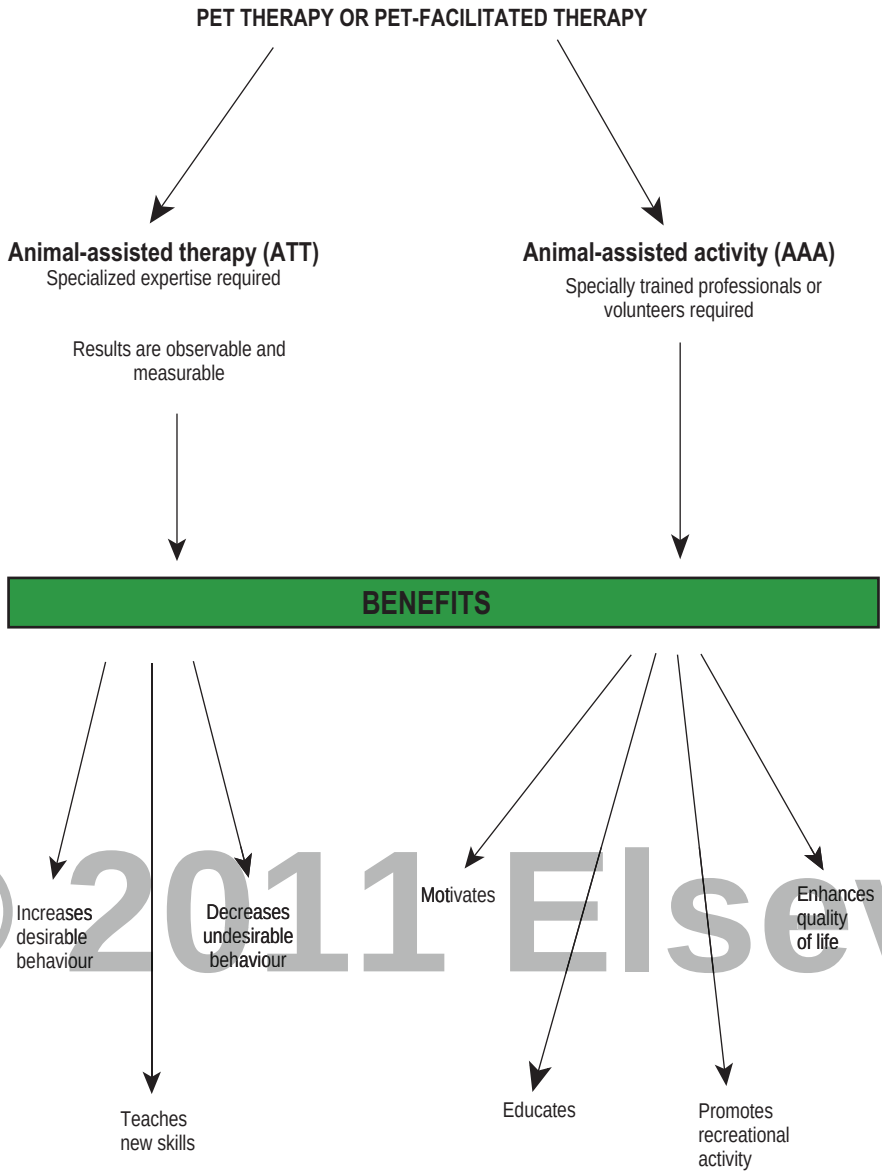

Fig. 33.3 The different branches of pet-facilitated therapy and its benefits to humans

Companion animals in hospitals, hospices and old people's homes

In 1976, freelance journalist and magistrate Lesley Scott-Ordish became aware of a growing hostility towards dogs and formed an organization called PRO Dogs (Public Relations Organization for Dogs). She was determined to promote their benefits to society and to encourage responsible dog ownership. Her recognition of the positive health effects that dogs could have on the sick and elderly led to the founding of PAT Dogs (PRO dogs Active Therapy) in 1983, an organization that arranged for volunteers to take their dogs to visit hospitals and residential homes. Today there are over 4500 PAT dogs and each of these dogs has been carefully vetted for temperament, health, and signs of external or internal parasites. The benefit that the visiting pets bring to the elderly has been discussed and there is much anecdotal as well as scientific evidence to back the theory. The most frequent success stories relate to people who were suffering severe depression and were non-communicative and withdrawn until striking up a relationship with a PAT dog. Early research into the effects of pet-facilitated therapy on the elderly had some surprising results. The investigators found that the increase in social activity and interaction between the residents that was initiated by the animal's arrival was short-lived, but the effects on the morale of the staff were considerably greater than the effects on the old people (CSS 1988). The use of a therapy dog in helping to alleviate the more unpleasant symptoms of Alzeimer's such as severe distress and anti-social behaviour has proved to be of some benefit (Churchill et al 1999).

Hospitals and hospices can be daunting places for most people and animals of various species are frequently used for the calming influence they can have on the patients. Children, in particular, are often terrified of the treatment they have to endure and an animal can be a welcome distraction. Le Fevre (2004) cites the case of a young girl suffering from chronic rheumatoid arthritis who was terrified of the

injections that she needed to have to combat the disease. The treatment, which should have been over in seconds, could take up to a traumatic 45 minutes to administer until the introduction of a brown poodle, whose presence allayed the child's fears.

Most recently, dogs have been found to be useful in the treatment of people suffering from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and drug dependency. A pet may be the only source of unconditional love and acceptance for these patients and will provide the fun and physical contact that is otherwise missing from their lives (Society for Companion Animal Studies 2000, Delta Society 2009).

Uses of companion animals

In order to do their job effectively, it is essential that dogs serving a vital role in the community be kept in the peak of condition. Veterinary nurses should be aware that any minor problem or complaint that would be of little consequence to the average companion dog can be devastating for a service dog and its owner.

Dogs have played an integral part in the lives of humans ever since they became a part of the human community. Originally they were simply used to guard and hunt but, as the needs of humans have changed, so the specific traits of certain breeds have been developed to accommodate them. Dogs are used for recreational activity; they are trained to support the military, the police and rescue services, and they are used as service dogs.

Dogs in sport

The dog's ability to hunt is instinctive but, when the use of guns replaced the more primitive means of hunting, new skills were required such as setting and retrieving.

Development of breeds for these abilities originated on the Iberian peninsula and soon spread to Europe and North America, where hunting was popular with the masses (Fogle 1995). Dogs bred for their speed such as lurchers, greyhounds and whippets are commonly used for racing and there is evidence of hare coursing dating back 1800 years to the Roman period (Fogle 1995). The artificial hare was introduced in the late 19th century but its success was not heralded until the introduction of a circular track, which made the race results less predictable than racing dogs on the straight. Dog racing is still popular in the modern day but the animal's sporting life is relatively short, leading to the problem of surplus dogs that may be euthanased, abandoned or, if they are lucky, rehomed. Fighting and baiting has appealled to the baser instinct of man through the centuries and is associated with the powerful breeds possessing strong jaws such as the mastiff and the bulldog. In spite of these cruel sports being illegal in most countries, it is known that illegitimate dogfights still take place and are a recognized problem in the UK.

Another popular sport that has since been banned is ratting, in which dogs were placed into enclosed pits with rats. Terriers were favoured for their skills in this area and it is thought that the development of the short-legged varieties, such as the Yorkshire terrier, was because their owners found them more convenient to transport (Fogle 1995). The herding instinct of certain breeds has been useful in agriculture for centuries, but more recently, sheep dog trials have been developed as a sport and are enjoyed by those who take part and by many of the viewing public. Dog agility has also become popular with both professional dog trainers and amateurs alike.

Dogs in the service of man

At one time, draught dogs were used in Europe to pull loads such as milk carts and to turn spits and waterwheels; although European draught dogs are no longer used for their original purpose, huskies still pull loads in the Arctic regions. For many years the dog's highly developed sense of smell has been used effectively to seek out the gourmet delicacy truffles and now this skill has been adapted for use by the military, the police and Customs and Excise to sniff out illicit substances. Dogs also support rescue organizations by helping to search for the victims of earthquakes and avalanches and aiding in mountain rescue. The Newfoundland, a breed that is particularly well adapted to water, is trained to support sea rescue teams.

Service dogs

Dogs will never become redundant as their natural ability and willingness to serve man can so easily be modified to new tasks. Perhaps one of the most valuable assets to humans are the service dogs. This is the official term, originating in the USA, to describe dogs that are used specifically to aid people with disabilities. The first service dogs were trained to lead the blind during WWI. Guide dogs must be highly trainable, as well as having good strength, stamina and a specific temperament; thus they tend to be limited to certain breeds such as Labrador retrievers and German shepherds (Fig. 33.4); however, it was soon recognized that dogs could be used for people with other types of disabilities. Hearing dogs, seizure alert dogs and assistance dogs have since been introduced, and any size or breed of dog can be used, including mixed breeds. This has been good news not only for the disabled person but also for the number of dogs that might otherwise have joined the statistics of unwanted animals. While the main task of the service dog is to replace a lost sense or physical ability, it was soon realized that they provide yet another important function by restoring the self-esteem of their handicapped owners. The disabled owner is given an objective in life through being encouraged to continue the animal's training and to look after its needs in terms of grooming and nurturing. Many disabled receivers of service dogs have found that their social life has improved because of the fact that a dog breaks down the communication barriers that often exist between disabled and able-bodied persons.

Dogs in medicine

It was hypothesized in 1989 that dogs might be able to detect malignant tumours in humans and, since then, there have been reports of dogs detecting malignancies of the skin, the breast and lung. An investigation carried out by Willis et al in 2005 found that success rate in dogs being able to select urine from patients suffering with cancer of the bladder was greater than it would be by chance alone.

Fig. 33.4 A German shepherd guide dog at work

Animals at war

A bronze memorial on the central reservation of Park Lane in Central London commemorates the heroic service of animals to man in wartime. It includes horses, donkeys, elephants, camels, dogs, cats and pigeons. Sixty-two animals that have served in wars have been awarded the PDSA's (Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals) Dickin medal, which is equivalent to the Victoria Cross awarded to humans for outstanding bravery. Animals have not only served in WWI and WWII, but continue to serve in wars across the world today. The most recent animal to have been awarded the Dickin medal was a dog called Sadie who, in 2007, discovered a pressure cooker packed with explosives hidden in the United Nations compound in Kabul, Afghanistan. Her discovery saved the lives of many people, both military and civilian (Carr 2008).

Ethics and welfare

Many of the major issues concerned with animal ethics and welfare come under the jurisdiction of the veterinary surgeon; however, it is useful for veterinary nurses to know the motive for any decisions that are made and to understand the reasoning behind them. Cases of cruelty and neglect are often born out of ignorance rather than intentional abuse and veterinary nurses can play a very special role in improving the welfare of animals and the general public by educating their clients in responsible pet ownership.

Ethics (see also Chapter 1)

In order to be conversant with animal welfare it is necessary to have a basic knowledge of ethics. The subject of ethics is considered daunting because it can be highly complex, variable and open to controversy but, for the purpose of this text, it will be kept as simple as possible.

Ethics are a set of moral principles and the foundation of ethics in animal welfare is whether animals have rights. People's attitude towards animals has changed considerably over time. Many of the early philosophers were influenced by Christian beliefs. Descartes (1596–1650) was quoted as saying, 'I think, therefore I am' and claimed that animals had no feelings and were merely machines. Kant (1724–1804) recognized that both man and beast were motivated by desire but considered that animals had no self-will and therefore were of no value. He conceded that any duty carried out towards an animal should be as an indirect duty to man. Others, such as Voltaire (1694–1778) and Hume (1711–1776), were opposed to Christian tradition and argued that because animals react to outside stimuli in the same way as man then they must possess thought and reasoning.

Modern society is more in accordance with the beliefs of Voltaire and Hume and it is generally agreed that animals do suffer and therefore have rights – but how far should these rights extend?

Rights can be separated into three different categories: natural rights, moral rights and legal rights. An animal's natural rights apply to what it needs to survive; therefore, in a domestic situation, it is the duty of humans to supply those needs in order for the animal to thrive. The moral rights of an animal are harder to define since animals do not have morals. A predator would not refrain from hunting purely because it felt it had a moral obligation towards its prey. Morals are a human concept that has developed through the ability of humans to reason. Some people would insist that animals have a moral claim on those who use them (Tannenbaum 1995). It may be argued that animals have no legal right, as one animal cannot sue another. Law is man-made, but the law is not such an ass as to allow a young child or animal to suffer because it cannot speak for itself, and legislation has therefore been drawn up to protect them (Dolan 1999).

Even if it can be established that an animal has rights, equal to a human's rights or not, the ethical treatment of animals is controlled by humans' principles. The problem with ethics is that not everyone has the same set of moral values; thus, a compromise has to be reached.

What is welfare?

Animals have been fashioned to accommodate human needs over the centuries and as a consequence are totally dependent upon humans for their welfare. Fraser and Broom (1990) defined welfare as 'the state of an animal as it attempts to cope with its environment' but a better definition is that of Webster (1994), who wrote, 'the welfare of an animal is determined by its capacity to avoid suffering and sustain fitness'.

Since the 1960s there has been a much greater awareness of animal welfare that has resulted in better conditions for farm animals, companion animals and laboratory animals.

In 1965 the Brambell Committee instituted a set of minimal standards for farm animals in intensive husbandry systems. Originally these standards, known as the five freedoms, were very basic, but in 1993 they were redefined by the Farm Animal Welfare Council and now include:

- Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition – by providing fresh water that is readily available and a suitable diet to sustain full fitness
- Freedom from discomfort – by providing a suitable environment that is clean and dry, has shelter and a comfortable resting area
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease – provision of adequate veterinary attention to ensure freedom from suffering
- Freedom to express normal behaviour – by providing suitable space, interspecific reaction and environmental enrichment
- Freedom from fear and distress – by ensuring that conditions that might cause mental suffering are avoided.

The five freedoms were intended as guidelines to improve the husbandry of farm animals but these standards can equally be applied to any animal that is reliant on man for its welfare. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) has been quick to promote these standards in its campaigns and, in 2002, the RSPCA called upon the government to introduce a 'duty of care' based on the freedoms so that anyone in charge of an animal has a legal obligation to comply with these standards.

While the five freedoms form a good moral basis for improving animal welfare, they are not flawless. For example, neutering a pet dog or cat causes a certain amount of stress and pain for a short time and the animal will be deprived of its normal behaviour, and yet such an action is beneficial to the animal's welfare in a domestic situation. In this case, by not giving the animal its natural rights, it may be saved from fatal diseases such as pyometra and feline leukaemia virus or the overpopulation of its species, which could lead to poorer welfare and the spread of disease. It is important when considering animal rights to look at the 'big picture' and to make sure that any action taken will not be to the detriment of human welfare or the environment. When animal rights activists released mink from a fur farm in Hampshire in 1998, they had not thought of the devastating damage that the mink would cause to the indigenous wildlife and the harm they would do to small pets.

The Protection of Animals Act 1911 protects certain animals against sins of commission and omission that are likely to cause the animal pain or unnecessary suffering. Sins of commission include acts of physical and mental abuse. Sins of omission are actions that are not carried out, in other words neglect. In 2002 the RSPCA reported that 89% of the cruelty cases prosecuted under this act were as a result of neglect (UK Pets 2002). As Webster (1994) points out, the questionable part of the Protection of Animals Act is what constitutes unnecessary suffering and why an animal should suffer at all. By taking the example of neutering, an animal may suffer at the time of treatment and yet it could be saved from greater potential suffering in the future; therefore, this suffering may be justified. However, if an animal's tail is docked because this is aesthetically pleasing to humans, then this could be considered to be unnecessary suffering.

Pain and distress in animals

Suffering is defined as the state of enduring pain, misery or loss. While pain is an unpleasant sensory experience it is a very necessary means to survival. Pain teaches an animal to avoid potentially harmful stimuli and to recognize them in the future. Pain also inhibits any action that might delay the healing process.

Scientists have established that animals possess a similar neuroanatomy to man but whether they feel pain with the same degree of intensity is a matter of speculation, since response to pain is both physical and emotional and the emotional response cannot be measured directly (Flecknell 1999). However, it can be assumed that an animal does feel pain and indication of this is shown in the changes of behaviour, physiological changes and response to analgesia described in Table 33.2.

We know that animals show changes in behaviour when suffering from physical discomfort but how does one know when an animal is suffering mental stress? Animals living in a restricted environment may become apathetic and appear to give up completely. Psychologists describe this behaviour as 'learned helplessness'. Other animals in a similar situation will develop abnormal behaviour patterns known as stereotypies. A stereotypy is defined as a repetitive, invariant action that serves no obvious purpose. This type of obsessive behaviour can be observed in animals kept in old-fashioned zoos and in intensive farming programmes, but it is not exclusive to these animals and is also frequently seen in companion animals.

Horses are particularly prone to stereotypies, which may include weaving, wind sucking, head bobbing, crib biting and pawing (see also Chapter 11). In the wild, horses are

Table33.2 Range of possible responses to pain

Behavioural response	Physiological response
Vocalization – squealing, crying out, grunting, growling, hissing, tooth-grinding, groaning	Fluctuations in body temperature
Decreased appetite or anorexia	Weight loss and dehydration
Change in facial expression	Positive response to analgesics
Change in personality – become docile, aggressive, depressed, anxious, isolated or fearful	Positive response to anti-inflammatory drugs
Altered posture – crouching, hunched up, abdomen tucked up, head down, recumbent	
Restlessness – frequent change of position, constant pacing	
Protective response – guarding the painful area, contact aversion, limping, restrictive movements	
Self-mutilation – licking, biting or scratching the area	
Decreased activity – sleeping a great deal	

highly sociable animals that remain in herds and spend over 50% of the day grazing. A horse that is kept in a stable is being deprived of its normal oral activity and mental stimulation. Not all horses develop stereotypies, as much depends on environmental and genetic influences; however, those that suffer chronic stress through being prevented from performing a natural activity will learn to redirect their behaviour.

Many species of smaller companion animal may also develop stereotypies. Both dogs and cats can express their anxiety by over-grooming and self-mutilation. Dogs that are lacking in mental stimulation may bark repetitively or chase their tails, whereas cats can express their frustration through fabric chewing or a condition known as feline hyperaesthesia that causes twitching and rippling of the skin. Stereotypies are seen in small caged animals such as the parrot that plucks its own feathers or a rodent that performs repetitive backflips or gnaws at the bars of the cage. While the performance of stereotypies is believed to help an animal cope with its environment (Koene 1996), they are suggestive of poor welfare and can be damaging to an animal's health. Once a stereotypy has developed it is extremely difficult to retract, so prevention by providing environmental enrichment is the optimum treatment.

Animals in research

The fitness of man has benefitted greatly from the use of animals in medical research, through the development of vaccines, antibiotics, hip replacements, organ transplants and genetic engineering; perhaps two of the greatest discoveries are those of insulin and the polio vaccine. While the advantages of this research to mankind are widely recognized, many of the advances that have been made are profoundly relevant to veterinary medicine and therefore animals are also beneficiaries.

The controversial aspect of experimenting on animals is that it may cause them pain, suffering or lasting harm, something of which scientists are well aware, and the reduction in the number of animals used in research over the past three decades reflects their concern. In 1973, 5.5 million animals were used for experimentation but by 2003 this number had been reduced to 2.79 million. While the latter figure still may appear to be vast, it can be put into perspective by further statistics issued by the Research Defence Society – in July 1994, 3.24 million animals were used in research in the UK but 693.2 million were killed for food (Dolan 1999).

Further disadvantages of using animals in research include:

- Gnotobiotic or germ-free animals are expensive to produce and maintain
- Laboratory animals are deprived of their freedom
- Species that are phylogenetically close to humans will not necessarily react in the same way to the same stimuli
- There is a risk to human health through bites, scratches and allergies
- There is a risk of severe mental trauma to staff that have to kill and dispose of these animals.

In 1831, the great physiologist Marshall Hall published his 'principles for animal experimentation' in which he prescribed that no experiment should be carried out without a definite objective, that no experiment should be needlessly repeated and that any experiment performed should be conducted with the least possible suffering. In 1959, W. Russell and R. Birch developed these axioms by introducing a concept known as 'the three Rs' that aimed to reduce the number of animals used, to refine techniques and produce more humane methods of experimentation and to replace the use of animals with non-sentient material such as computers or cell cultures. These principles are still in use today and, in conjunction with the Animals Scientific Procedures Act 1986, conditions for research animals have greatly improved (Dolan 1999, Webster 1994).

Under the Animals Scientific Procedures Act 1986 every research project involving animals requires a licence. In order to gain the licence, a cost and benefit analysis must be conducted to show that the potential results are vital enough to warrant the use of animals. The authorities must be convinced that the experiments cannot be carried out using non-animal methods and that the minimum number of animals will be used. Dogs, cats and primates are only used if it is clear that other species are inappropriate. Everyone involved in the research, from scientists to technicians, must hold a personal licence indicating that they have sufficient skill, training and experience. Each research institution must have suitable animal housing and veterinary facilities on site and must be issued with a certificate of designation. Once the licence has been granted, vets and doctors who are employed by the Home Office monitor the research conditions. Inspections take place at least 12 times a year and usually there is no advance warning (RDS 2004).

Most authorities, including animal welfare organizations, accept that animal research is necessary for scientific advancement at present, but the animal's welfare must always be the chief consideration. In 2004, the UK government doubled its funding for the welfare of laboratory animals with the establishment of a national centre for research into developing more humane techniques and producing alternatives to animal experimentation.

Responsible pet ownership

Responsible pet ownership is not just taking care of an animal's welfare, it is also being responsible to the society and environment in which the pet will live, making it more tolerable for non-animal-lovers. The guidance that can be given to clients by veterinary nurses will enhance the bond between owners and their pets.

Treatment against worms and fleas

The topic most likely to enrage non-animal-lovers and responsible pet owners alike is the amount of pollution caused by dog faeces. It has been estimated that approximately 1 000 000 kg of canine faeces is deposited in the UK every day. Apart from the fact that it is not aesthetically pleasing, it has been well publicized that faecal waste from dogs and cats can spread disease. Clients must be advised that regular treatment against the roundworms *Toxocara canis* and *Toxocara cati* and the common tapeworms *Dipylidium caninum* and *Taenia hydatigena* is the only way of ensuring that their pet will remain healthy and will not be a

threat to public health. They should also be encouraged to pick up their pet's faeces and to dispose of it in the bins provided, or in their own dustbin, to maintain a safe and pleasant environment.

Many pet owners live under the happy illusion that their pet is immune to fleas and it is not until there is a severe infestation or their pet has developed a flea-bite allergy that they will make an appearance at the surgery. Veterinary nurses should take every opportunity to encourage their clients to treat their pets regularly against fleas, explaining that it is a year-round problem and can be instrumental in causing infection with *Dipylidium caninum* in both cats and dogs.

Vaccination

The fact that many of the fatal and debilitating diseases to which cats and dogs can succumb are relatively rare is entirely due to vaccination programmes. Unfortunately many pet owners do not realise this and do not understand that immunity can only be maintained through booster vaccinations. It is the job of veterinary staff to educate their clients in this subject and to encourage them by incorporating free health checks and sending booster reminders. Particular care should be taken in ensuring that pets entering boarding establishments and breeding bitches and queens are up to date with their vaccinations. Rabies vaccine is an intrinsic part of the Pet Travel Scheme that allows dogs, cats and ferrets to travel from certain countries listed by DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) into the United Kingdom without the need for quarantine. Also it allows people to take pets to countries that are members of the European Union and return with them to the UK. A blood test must be taken after 3 weeks of having the vaccine to ensure that the animal has developed the required number of antibodies and a period of 6 months must elapse following a positive result before transit back into the UK is allowed. The purpose of the Pet Travel Scheme is to keep the UK free from rabies and certain other diseases; therefore, pets are required to be examined by a veterinary surgeon and treated against ticks and *Echinococcus* between 24 and 48 hours of returning to this country.

Neutering

One female cat can be responsible for 20 000 offspring over 5 years (Jevring and Catanzaro 1999), based on the principle that each female has two litters of six kittens a year, including two queens. Animal rescue organizations are inundated with unwanted companion animals and neutering is an important aspect of animal welfare.

Another reason for neutering is the prevention of hormone-related diseases such as pyometra, mammary tumours and testicular tumours. Cats and dogs can be neutered for behavioural reasons and, although it is not always the antidote for aggression in dogs, it can help to modify other unwanted sex-related behaviour. Cats and dogs are less likely to wander in search of females in oestrus, thus preventing straying and road-traffic accidents. Cats in particular are prone to fighting when entire, and neutering will prevent the spread of diseases such as feline leukaemia virus. There are many myths about neutering born through people's tendency to anthropomorphize, but these are largely unfounded. For example, there is no evidence that a female needs to have puppies or kittens and neutering will not affect a male's personality other than to calm an excited animal or reduce aggression. There may be coat changes in some bitches, but the tendency for any animal to put on weight after ovariohysterectomy or castration can easily be controlled by diet.

There are differences in opinion as to when neutering should take place. Both the British Small Animal Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Association endorse the neutering of animals pre-puberty, suggesting that the operation is easier and less traumatic at this stage. It will also prevent unwanted litters, which is a valuable consideration for welfare organizations that rehome puppies and kittens. Many veterinarians prefer to delay the procedure until the animal is closer to sexual maturity and, in the case of females, after its first oestrus. However, it is generally believed that late castration will have little impact in modifying aggressive male behaviour.

Socialization

The most crucial socialization period for kittens is thought to be between 2 and 7 weeks of age and the more kittens are handled at this stage, the better they will relate to humans (Robinson 1992) (see also Chapter 10). In 1965 Fuller and Scott isolated puppies from humans between the ages of 4 weeks and 12 weeks and as a result these puppies were fearful of humans and were virtually impossible to train (Nott 1992). It is recognized that primary social relationships are formed between the ages of 4 and 8 weeks and therefore puppies from 4 weeks should be introduced to novel stimuli during this time and it is essential that socialization should continue to be reinforced as the puppy matures into adulthood.

Veterinary practices can play a vital role in a puppy's early stage of development by introducing puppy parties for new owners. These parties allow puppies to be socialized with other people and animals and to be exposed to new experiences within a controlled environment. Most importantly, from the veterinary staff's point of view, they will learn to be relaxed in a clinical environment. Clients can be shown the value of grooming to maintain the condition of their pets' coats and to establish a bond with their pet. Puppy classes provide the ideal environment for veterinary nurses to educate their clients about nutrition, vaccination, treatment against parasites, dental care and how to examine their pets for early signs of disease. A popular misconception is that puppies cannot be trained until the age of 6 months. While a puppy cannot learn a complicated task, it is beneficial to teach a puppy basic training using reward. Basic training can be introduced at these gatherings like a party game and something that is fun for both the owner and the pet. Also veterinary nurses can use these times to discuss animal behaviour with their clients and to help them recognize the way in which animals communicate.

Training and control

Owning a dog should be a pleasurable experience and this can only be achieved through a comprehensive training programme. All dogs should be taught the basic commands

such as heel, sit, down, stay and leave, as this not only will make a dog more socially acceptable but also will help to ensure the dog's own safety. Dog training helps to prevent behaviour problems and encourages a dog to bond with its owner.

The best way to train is through positive techniques, rewarding the correct response with treats or attention. Many experienced owners like to train the dog themselves but veterinary staff should be ready to advise all dog owners of suitable training classes in the area. Trainers and training clubs should be well vetted before recommendation.

Many people mistakenly believe that the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 applies only to certain breeds: however, it can apply to any dog regardless of breed or size. An animal that is out of control can be a danger to itself, to the general public and to the environment. Even in 1951 it was reported that 75 000 dogs were involved in road accidents and, as a result, there were 3000 human casualties and 23 deaths (CSS 1988). Under the Road Traffic Act 1972, it is an offence to have, cause or permit a dog to be off the lead on a designated road; however, this law appears to be difficult to enforce. Loose dogs are not only a problem on the road but also they can endanger wildlife and farm stock. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act was introduced in 2005 and allows District and Parish Councils to make a Dog Control Order relating to areas where the public are entitled to have access. This may cover fouling of land by dogs and removal of faecal waste; the keeping of dogs on leads; the exclusion of dogs from land; and the number of dogs which a person may take on a lead. Failure to comply with these local regulations may result in receipt of a fixed penalty notice payable within 14 days.

It is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for a dog to be off the lead in a large field or enclosure containing sheep and the farmer is within his rights to kill a dog that he considers is worrying livestock. Stray dogs can be partially to blame but too often it is poorly controlled family pets.

Feral dogs and cats have had a considerable impact on the wildlife population and may be partly responsible for the extinction of some species (CCS 1988), but it is not only wandering dogs and cats that affect the ecology. Pet rabbits released into the wild have destroyed the habitat of burrow nesting seabirds such as puffins. Colonies of parakeets are almost commonplace in parts of London and the south-east and terrapins were commonly released into waters in the UK following the fad for 'ninja turtles'. It is unlikely that the terrapins would survive long enough to have a severe impact on British wildlife and no one is yet sure whether the parakeets are causing damage; however, the disappearance of the red squirrel following the introduction of the grey squirrel into Great Britain shows how a non-indigenous species can upset the ecology.

Pet abuse

Pet abuse may be defined as causing an animal deliberate suffering either by physical violence, mental torture, sexual abuse or organized fighting. It is a subject that has been overlooked in the past but, apart from the cruelty to the animals involved, incidents of violence towards pets may lead to abuse of other family members. Physical abuse towards pets is not only disturbing and antisocial but also it is illegal and it can have a severe effect on child development, whether through witnessing such behaviour or by being the perpetrator. Research in America has shown that violent criminals frequently have a history of serious pet abuse from childhood (Flynn 2000, Anon 2004).

Cases of non-accidental injury (NAI) of animals are not reported for the following reasons:

- NAI is not recognized
- Veterinary surgeons are fearful of reporting suspected cases as it might compromise the safety of the victims
- Veterinary surgeons fear breaching client confidentiality and the subsequent legal action
- Veterinary surgeons fear for their personal safety
- Abused family members are frightened of initiating further abuse of themselves, their children or pets
- Victims of abuse are fearful of losing the pets that have become their emotional support (Nicol 2003, Anon 2004).

Signs of pet abuse

It has been questioned whether cases of pet abuse would ever be presented at surgery but more than 48% of practitioners who took part in a recent survey acknowledged NAI (Munro and Thrusfield 2001, Nicol 2003). It is not always easy to recognize NAIs but there are some very distinct characteristics that indicate abuse. Often the types of injuries are similar to those described in cases of child abuse such as finger tip bruising, lash marks and cigarette burns. Broken ribs appear to be a regular feature of abuse in animals and suspicion is aroused particularly when the history is inconsistent with the type and extent of the injury. Other features include retinal and scleral haemorrhage, subdural haematomas and buccal trauma. Repetitive injury has been cited as an important indicator of NAI. A broken femur may not arouse suspicion on the first occasion but when an animal is presented with the same injury two or more times then it can be fairly certain that the injury was not accidental. Multiple occurrences of the same injury but to different animals within a household should be a cause of concern too.

Inconsistency between history and injury was frequently mentioned in Munro and Thrusfield's (2001) report. Clients reported that children had dropped their animals, the pet had lain too close to a fire or the pet had fallen and, as one veterinary surgeon remarked, cats do not fall down stairs. Another respondent described how the injuries of a cat were consistent with those that might be sustained in a road-traffic accident but during a further consultation the respondent discovered that the cat was not allowed outside. The history can be considered as suspect when it changes in telling by different people.

The behaviour of both pet and owner are often indicative of foul play. The pet may be excessively fearful or submissive in the presence of its owner or it may appear to be dull and depressed. The owner may show embarrassment and be reluctant to give a history or be defensive and become angry and aggressive on being questioned. Some clients will name the perpetrator and a few will admit to causing harm to the pet themselves.

The Links Group: dealing with child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence

Until recently animal abuse and domestic violence were thought to be unrelated but current research and scientific evidence has proved otherwise. In the light of this knowledge, the Links Group was introduced into the United Kingdom in 2001 pioneered by the animal health company Intervet. The aim of this society is to encourage collaboration between the various organizations and charities involved in the protection of vulnerable people and animals and prevent the potential escalation of domestic violence. The Links Group serves to educate professional groups into understanding that pet abuse can also be a human welfare issue.

Seminars are being run at veterinary colleges in the UK to highlight the awareness of non-accidental injury in animals and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons now include sections on animal abuse, child abuse and domestic violence in its Guide to Professional Conduct (Le Fevre 2008). A major achievement of the Links Group has been the introduction of a joint Royal Society Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) inspector training programme which encourages greater cross-reporting of suspected violence towards animals or children.

A support group known as Paws for Kids provides foster care for pets of women and children who have been moved to 'safe houses'. It enables owners to remain responsible for their pets and to be reunited once they are in suitable accommodation and can ensure their own safety (Anon 2004). Other members of the Links Group include Refuge, Dogs Trust, Scottish Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals. The Links Groups has already been established in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada, and there are hopes that Spain, Austria, Italy, Brazil and Japan will soon join the movement (The Links Group 2007).

Euthanasia

Euthanasia is a time when veterinary nurses can be of the greatest support to veterinary surgeons and their clients. Many books have been written on this subject but they are often aimed at the veterinary surgeons who have to perform this stressful duty or at the clients who have to face this difficult decision. This section describes the role that veterinary nurses play before, during and after the euthanasia.

It is easy to become blasé when euthanasia is performed on such a regular basis; however, many veterinary surgeons and nurses describe how, even after many years in practice, they still feel upset when it is time to euthanase a companion animal, especially if they are particularly fond of the client or the pet. Imagine how much worse some clients must feel when they make the decision to 'kill' the very animal that they have nurtured, sometimes over many years. This pet may have supported them through major life changes such as divorce, death of a close relation, retirement or adult children leaving home. Euthanasia is the last and most selfless act that a person can do for their animal. The majority of pet owners suffer acute grief and anguish when the time comes to end the life of a pet; however, there are the odd few that appear not to care at all. Everyone reacts differently to a situation and the veterinary nurse must be prepared for anything and remain completely non-judgemental.

When pets' conditions become untreatable, veterinary surgeons may advise the clients that euthanasia might be an option. It is very important that owners fully comprehend how ill a pet is before deciding on euthanasia and there must be no cause for them to believe that they have been forced into a decision that they later regret (Stewart 1999). Veterinary surgeons will have explained the reason for their recommendation and will have carefully described the procedure to the clients but sometimes, when people are distressed, information is difficult to assimilate. Veterinary nurses may be required to clarify what has been said and to give reassurance to the clients.

Reasons for euthanasia and other considerations

There are many justifiable reasons for pet euthanasia. These include:

- Severe injury
- Terminal illness that has progressed to the point where palliative treatment has little or no effect
- Injury or disease resulting in permanent loss of bodily functions
- Old age when physical health affects the 'quality of life'
- Old age when physical health appears fairly good but the animal is displaying mental deterioration
- The animal is aggressive to the point of being a danger to other people or pets
- The pet has a serious disease that could be passed to man (Fogle 1981, Stewart 1999).

When making a recommendation for a pet's life to be prolonged or terminated, the veterinary surgeon has to take many things into consideration, of which the most important is the welfare of the pet (Table 33.3). It is also necessary to assess the owner's ability to cope with a sick pet physically, mentally and financially, and other family members should also be taken into consideration.

Table33.3 Welfare factors to be taken into consideration when recommending euthanasia

Physical factors	Mental factors	Quality of life
Pain – Is the animal in pain and can the pain be controlled?	Does the animal have the will to live?	No longer eating or drinking
Lack of mobility – Can the animal move around with or without help?	Interest in life – Does the animal want to go for walks or mix with people or others of its species?	Loss of control of urination and defecation
Breathing – Is the animal able to breathe without difficulty?	Depressed, over-anxious or suffers separation anxiety	Number of 'bad' days exceeds the number of 'good' days

While euthanasia can be a merciful release, there are other less justifiable reasons why clients make this decision. These include:

- A family member has developed a pet allergy
- Owners cannot cope financially
- Owners are moving to a place that does not allow pets
- Impulse buy or unwanted gift
- Lack of previous experience with pets
- Changes in the domestic situation such as divorce, arrival of a baby or family bereavement
- Family disputes over the animal (Fogle 1981, Stewart 1999).

In these cases every effort should be made to persuade the client to take other options and, if they do not comply, the veterinary surgeon may refuse to carry out euthanasia.

The procedure for euthanasia

Whether euthanasia takes place at the client's home or in the surgery, the owner must be treated with sensitivity at all times. Ideally, the way in which the client wishes to dispose of the body will have been discussed at a time when the owner is not feeling emotionally confused, and it is good practice to have information on the options of body disposal, local services and costs on display in the waiting room at all times. When euthanasia is requested at the surgery, the appointment should be made when the practice is likely to be at its quietest. Neither the client nor the pet should be kept waiting in a noisy waiting room as this may be stressful to both parties. Every member of staff should be informed when euthanasia is taking place so that they might act appropriately.

The room where euthanasia is taking place should be spotless, making sure that clean towels and blankets are provided, also a chair for the owner and a box of tissues. Many people like to stay with their pet during euthanasia but others prefer to leave the room, but either way, the client's wishes should be respected. If the owner does wish to stay with the pet, the veterinary surgeon will explain to them exactly what to expect. The nurse will be asked to restrain the animal but the owner should be encouraged to cradle its head and to stroke and talk to it throughout the procedure. Sometimes a nervous pet will need to be restrained with a muzzle and this should be done as gently and tactfully as possible and it may be necessary to tranquillize a very stressed patient. It is essential that the veterinary surgeon and veterinary nurse remain calm, speaking softly and kindly to the pet and addressing it by name. In potentially difficult cases, such as animals with poor blood pressure, the veterinary surgeon may choose options other than an intravenous injection into the cephalic vein. In this case, the reason should be fully explained to the client.

When the animal has been pronounced dead, it should be made to look comfortable and at peace. Restraints or catheters should be removed; a clean absorbent pad should be put beneath the pet and a blanket placed over the body leaving the head exposed. Any syringes and bottles should be disposed of as soon as possible. The owners who have stayed may wish to spend some time alone with their pet or they may want the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse to remain with them. Owners who have not been present should be offered the opportunity to view the pet's body, and other family members or friends should be given this option too. Some owners may be very shaken and it may help to offer them a cup of tea before travelling home; others may prefer to leave immediately and, where possible, should be shown an alternative exit.

Unless the client is a complete stranger to the practice or has a reputation for non-payment of bills, the charge should be deferred until a more suitable time. Once the client has left the surgery, the staff should continue to treat the patient's body with dignity and respect.

Bereavement

A pet owner often suffers a similar grieving process to someone who is mourning for another human being. The characteristic stages of grief include:

- Shock – a feeling of numbness and disbelief
- Disorganization – the bereaved person may find difficulty doing the simplest task
- Denial – expecting the deceased to return
- Depression – usually when the loss becomes reality
- Guilt – both real and imagined, e.g. the feeling of having been neglectful or having had angry thoughts and feelings towards the deceased when alive
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Resolution and acceptance when emotions lessen
- Re-integration – acceptance that life carries on, although occasional pining or despair may reappear on occasions (Gross 1999).

The most common emotions associated with loss witnessed in the veterinary surgery are guilt and anger and, in both cases, the staff must offer reassurance and show tolerance.

Most people work their way through the grieving process by talking to friends. Others will find it difficult to share their grief in case they are ridiculed for being emotional over a pet. Many clients appreciate a condolence card sent from the surgery as a show of sympathy, and this may help them to justify their feelings. A few people who have formed a high degree of attachment to their pet may suffer pathological grief and it may be necessary for a staff member to suggest tactfully that the client might wish to contact a bereavement counsellor such as SCAS (Society for Companion Animal Studies), Blue Cross Befrienders Service or local recommended groups or individuals.

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Recommended reading

Jevring, C., Catanzaro, T., 1999. Healthcare of the Well Pet. W B Saunders, London.

A useful guide on pet healthcare offering sound advice on how veterinary nurses can educate clients to be responsible pet owners

Stewart, M.F., 1999. Companion Animal Death. A Practical and Comprehensive Guide for Veterinary Practice. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.

A book that offers a sensitive approach to pet euthanasia and bereavement, dealing with the issues that occur regularly in veterinary practice

Webster, J., 1994. Animal Welfare. A Cool Eye towards Eden. Blackwell Science, Oxford.

A very readable book covering every aspect of animal welfare