Are Companion Animals the Secret to Good Health?

BRADLEY SMITH and PETRA BYWOOD
Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHC RIS)
Contact details: Petra.Bywood@flinders.edu.au  Tel (08) 7221 8516

Introduction

- People usually keep pets for companionship, recreation and protection rather than specifically for enhancing their health.¹
- Studies indicate that companion animal ownership is beneficial to physical, psychological and social health.²

Aims

- To summarise the health-related aspects of companion animal ownership
- To identify ways in which general practitioners can encourage patients to improve their health and wellbeing by interacting with their pets.

Methods

- A review of the literature was conducted to explore the relationship between pets/companion animals and health.

Findings

- Pets may provide a range of health benefits to their owners (see Figure 1)
- Improved health and wellbeing related to pet ownership reduces the use of healthcare services³
- GPs may integrate patient-pet interaction into self-management plans – e.g., walking the dog
- In clinical settings, companion animals decrease stress experienced by autistic children; and increase rapport between practitioner and child
- Determining the level of pet attachment and interaction facilitates discussion about health and lifestyle
- Understanding a patient’s attachment to their pet(s) may also explain why they may be reluctant to seek help if they fear separation from their beloved pet.

Conclusions

- While it is not appropriate to recommend or ‘prescribe’ the purchase of a pet, encouraging patients to increase the quality of interactions with their pet may improve their physical, psychological and social health and wellbeing.


References


Figure 1. Health-related benefits of companion animal ownership