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Pet ownership and human health

L.S.Reade, D.M.Broom, A.L.Podberscek

*Animal Welfare and Human-Animal Interactions Group
Department of Clinical Veterinary Medicine, University of Cambridge,
Madingley Road, Cambridge, CB3 0ES, United Kingdom*

Introduction

Previous studies of the relationships between pet ownership and attachment, and human health, have detected beneficial changes in both the physical and psychological health of people. For example, Friedmann *et al.* (1980), investigated the effects of pet ownership upon myocardial infarction and acute angina pectoris patients. They found that pet owners appeared to have a greater likelihood of survival one year after myocardial infarction or acute angina pectoris than those patients that did not own a pet. Recent evidence suggests that by providing companionship, pets may also decrease feelings of loneliness and depression in some owners (Goldmeier, 1986; Zasloff & Kidd, 1994), and may increase owner morale and self esteem (Robb, 1983; Connell & Lago, 1984).

However, there have also been studies which have shown no effects or even negative effects associated with pet ownership (Friedmann *et al.* 1984; Watson & Weinstein, 1993). The conflicting evidence for the potential link between pet ownership and improved owner health prompted the initiation of the current study.

Methodology

The methodology of the study has been designed to examine the effects of pet ownership on myocardial infarction patients differentiated as pet owners (the test group), and non-owners (the control group). An estimated total sample population of 400 myocardial patients are currently being recruited through two hospitals and data are being collected through the use of a series of self-report questionnaires. To lessen the chance of bias in the responses, the patients are only told that the study is concerned with the effects of lifestyle on human health, and responses are sent to a private address.

Measures

Demographic and personal lifestyle characteristics are recorded through the employment of a Lifestyle questionnaire. Demographic characteristics assessed include gender, age, marital status, and employment status. Among the questions on patients' lifestyles, are ones seeking details on risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including: diet and exercise habits; smoking habits; alcohol consumption; and recent life stresses. Additionally, questions on living arrangement ask whether or not other people are living with the respondent.

The number of social contacts, and the patients' satisfaction with this are assessed by the 12-item Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason *et al.* 1983). This questionnaire asks respondents to list people whom they can rely on in various situations, and to rate their degree of satisfaction with the social support that they receive in those situations. From this, both a social contact score, and a patient social satisfaction score can be calculated.

All subjects are asked to complete a Pet Ownership Questionnaire. Respondents identifying themselves as non-owners are asked a series of questions about their previous pet owning experience, including species owned and degree of attachment to it. Questions concerning whether or not they would like to own a pet, and the reasons given, are also included. Pet owning respondents are asked considerably more detailed questions concerning their relationship with their pet(s). Questions focus upon the type of pet(s) owned, who is responsible for their care, and the frequency and intensity of interactions with them. Respondents are also asked about the perceived benefits and negative aspects of pet ownership.

Both pet owning and non-owning subjects are asked to complete the 28-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28), a psychiatric screening test designed to measure psychological components of ill-health (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). The questionnaire is divided into four sections, from which four symptom scores can be calculated. The sum of the four scores provides the main severity score.

These instruments are currently being administered to patients following hospital release, and again six months later. The preliminary results, derived from the data obtained from 100 patients will be presented.

At the six month follow-up, a Medical Information questionnaire is also administered to patients, and asks patients about their medical details, including their current medication. Information concerning readmittance to hospital and development of further complications is also being collected.

The results of this study will provide an assessment of the impact of pet ownership on the health status of persons following myocardial infarction, and thus, a further insight into the effects of pets on human health.

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