

The paradox of access to veterinary care

By Susan Krebsbach, DVM; Michael Blackwell, DVM, MPH, FNAP; and Candice Hinkle, MBA

Released by the Access to Veterinary Care Coalition (AVCC) last December, "Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy" disclosed that more than one out of four households experienced barriers to obtaining veterinary care, with the most frequent being financial.* In addition, the report found dogs and cats living in lower-income households and with younger pet owners are most at risk for not receiving recommended veterinary care.

While it may seem logical to say that those who cannot afford veterinary care should not have a pet, the reality is, many do. Yet, it is not likely their pets will be taken away from them, nor should they (given the human-animal bond) except in the most egregious circumstances. This social paradox challenges veterinary and social service professionals who want to ensure access to veterinary care.

The logic of affordability makes sense in the most simplistic of ways. But in life, things happen: the breadwinner of the family becomes sick; you lose a job unexpectedly; the stock market takes a downward spiral and a good investment goes bad; you take in a beloved pet from an ailing relative; a stray cat shows up on your doorstep and captures your heart; your family is severed by the crushing blow of divorce... The possibilities of unforeseen circumstances impacting a client's ability to cover expenses are endless.

The working poor

What about those people who have not fallen on hard times, but simply cannot afford veterinary care even before they acquired a pet? Most of us in the field of veterinary medicine have seen this because it happens all too frequently to members of our own profession. Just recently, a veterinary technician whom is admired by many shared her struggles with the cost of care associated with the pets who have walked into her life. This is despite working full-time as a veterinary technician, pet-sitting on a regular



basis, and being reimbursed for work on other projects.

How about the homeless? The elderly? The disabled? Should they be denied the companionship of pets? Brooke, a college student who had been in and out of homelessness for six years, proudly presented her now healthy cat, Kiki, for a recheck exam at a clinic that provided services for pets of the homeless. It was during this

visit that Brooke shared Kiki was a stray who was incessant on adopting a reluctant Brooke. Soon after the "adoption," this audacious tortoiseshell wrapped herself around Brooke's heart and spirit. Not much later, the two became bonded for life, something that had escaped them both prior to their union. But what was most inspiring is how Brooke realized she started taking better care of herself so she could take care of Kiki.

Ah, the power of pets... They can get us exercising when our body says no, make us laugh when we didn't think we had anything to laugh about, get us up in the morning when we would rather cover our head with the blanket, and, like Brooke and Kiki, be a reason to take better care of ourselves.

So, let's circle back to the logic of affordability. Are we prepared to take pets away from these families, or promote the idea to do so?

If the answer is yes, then who is responsible for deciding the appropriate income level, denying the companionship of pets to those who fall below this level, and finding the seized pets an appropriate home?

If the answer is no, we have two choices: One, we can continue to ignore families in need and the potential suffering of family pets who are not receiving veterinary care, or two, establish a safety net of care for the nonhuman members of the family.

Let's consider what happens when veterinary care is inaccessible. A pet may face prolonged illness, pain, and recovery time, or premature death, causing physical and emotional distress for the pet and the family.

Some of these pets are relinquished to the animal sheltering system, thus breaking up the family and adding to the burden of their already resource-strapped services. While veterinarians are known to be generous and charitable by discounting or giving away services, many are financially unable to provide the needed veterinary care required by millions of underserved pets. This, in turn, causes frustration amongst some veterinary professionals, leading to emotional pain and guilt of not being able to help a pet while having the knowledge, skills, and desire to do so. Further, having millions of pets with inadequate health care throughout communities may present unacceptable risks to public health. Zoonotic diseases transmitted by pets can impact human health.

Establishing a safety net of veterinary care is a means to help people bounce up when they hit bottom, not as a net under which to trap the less fortunate. These families deserve companionship with pets and to enjoy all the benefits that come from these relationships: mental, emotional, and physical health and well-being. Pets bring joy, support, protection, and comfort to their families. Denying a family companionship with a pet because they happen to be poor is difficult to defend. Consequently, it is vitally important the veterinary profession, in collaboration with others, ensures access to veterinary care for these families. ●

REFERENCES

* "Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy" is available at bit.ly/2Ssc00Y.

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