



*Submission from The Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) to
the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness*

**The Role of Companion Animals in Mitigating Loneliness and in
Supporting Healthy Ageing**

Introduction and background

SCAS is a multidisciplinary health education charity founded in 1979 with members drawn from the health and social care professions. The interdisciplinary nature of SCAS creates unique synergies through which can be addressed some of modern society's most pressing problems. The focus of our work is the human-animal bond, that is the symbiotic relationships that people have with companion animals, and more specifically how to harness the beneficial effects of this bond through companion animal ownership, assistance animal partnerships and animal assisted interventions (AAI).

SCAS is a Founding Member of The International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations (IAHAIO), the global umbrella organisation, to which national groups studying and advancing this field belong. IAHAIO is a nongovernmental organisation reporting to The World Health Organisation and United Nations. IAHAIO has issued a series of Resolutions on aspects of the human-animal bond. These are to inform and advise local and national governments on the implementation of best practice.

SCAS develops and delivers training to practitioners from the health, education and social care professions about the human-animal bond including animal assisted interventions, pet loss support, humane education and bond-centred practice. SCAS members are particularly interested in how the human-animal bond can be applied to help disadvantaged groups and individuals, including older people, people with disabilities, the marginalised and people cared for in institutions (Ormerod *et al*). Over the past 35 years' SCAS members have introduced programmes throughout the UK which help address the needs of disadvantaged groups. These include hospital visitation programmes such as Pets as Therapy and Therapet; the assistance dog programmes Canine Partners, Dogs for Good and Hearing Dogs for Deaf People; pet fostering services such as Paws for Kids and the Pet Fostering Service Scotland; and programmes for the rehabilitation of offenders, for example Paws for Progress at Polmont Young Offenders Institution.

Implementation of AAI programmes has the potential to deliver improvements in health and quality of life, whilst concurrently delivering enormous fiscal savings. This short submission will discuss how the human-animal bond can support and promote health, social care, healthy ageing, quality of life and social capital. SCAS strongly recommends an urgent review of UK pets in housing policy. The potential for fiscal savings from appropriate implementation of AAI, as referred to in the IAHAIO Resolutions should be assessed.

Companion Animals and Social Support

There are 10.8 million people aged 65 or over in the UK, with 3.8 million older people living alone (UK Office National Statistics). Animal companions have an important role to play for community-based elderly and especially for those living alone. Animals provide friendship, comfort and support and encourage feelings of independence. Owners report that they value the relationships they have with their animals which are characterised by being non-judgemental and involving unconditional acceptance. Companion animals encourage laughter, play and spontaneous behaviours. In caring for a pet an older person has opportunities to nurture and be nurtured. Animals also provide a tactile focus, now recognised as important in maintaining health. The care routine for the pet also provides structure to the day. Owners have reason to get up in the morning to check & feed the pets. They feel needed, their lives have role and purpose. It is important for one's self esteem to have an identity and a purpose.

Companion animal ownership provides both an identity and purposeful occupation - being a carer of another more vulnerable, and not always being the recipient of care. Many older people choose to eat at the same time as their pets - especially if they live alone. Catering for the pets reminds them that they too should buy food and prepare meals. Dogs need to be exercised, pets need to be groomed and so on. Older pet owners often keep their homes warmer, for the animals and hence reduce their own risk of hypothermia.

Healthier self-ratings are recorded among adult pet owners compared to non-owners and one study reported higher achievement scores among pet owners than non-owners (Chouinard). Adults over 65 years who care for pets have also described themselves more favourably as nurturing, independent and optimistic (Kidd and Feldman).

Most people have "conversations" with their animals, feel that the animals understand them and do not "*think they are going mad*" as they might if they were speaking to themselves. The companionship of an animal mitigates against loneliness and depression. McNicholas recorded that woman with breast cancer reported higher levels of support from their cats than from their human partners. Pet ownership did not affect perceived health or adjustment to cancer but was associated with less perceived disfigurement through the disease. Pet ownership was also significantly associated with better perceived control of illness and treatment. The animals were found to provide valuable support mainly through emotional and tactile comfort. The relationship with the pets remained unaffected despite the serious illness, whereas relationships with other people are affected.

For many older people a companion animal is a link with a deceased loved one and is often their most significant other. Sadly, companion animals have comparatively short life spans although with recent advances in veterinary therapeutics, vaccination and

nutrition animals are now living significantly longer. The loss of a companion animal can have a profound effect on an owner. SCAS has developed support for bereaved owners, initially by introducing a pet loss support service and subsequently through introducing a range of training programmes in pet bereavement support for under and postgraduates.

Companion animals and human health

Over the past 40 years' scientific studies have demonstrated that interactions with companion animals can offer a plethora of effective, yet low cost, health and social benefits. Guide Dogs for the Blind was introduced to the UK in the 1930's and all will be familiar with this programme. Since the 1980's new assistance dog programmes have been introduced to assist people with other specific health problems. Hearing Dogs alert people to particular noises; other highly trained dogs, such as Canine Partners, can assist severely disabled people with the tasks of daily living; Seizure Alert dogs signal ahead of an impending fit in the handler, allowing the person to take prophylactic actions. Medical Alert Dogs are trained to aid cancer diagnoses through their acute sense of smell; others alert to biochemical and physiological changes in their owners - e.g., to abnormal glucose and cortisol levels; to cardiac arrhythmia and to escalating pain levels - before their human partners are aware of any alterations.

Those who are fortunate to have their lives enriched through such highly trained assistance dogs report that having the dog markedly increases their independence. They also state that the tasks, important as they are, are only one aspect of the beneficial relationship. They state that the social support they receive is equally as important - and that everyone, whether disabled or not, can benefit from a human-animal bond (personal communication Alan Parton, of his relationship with Canine Partner Endal) Improvements in general health and psychological wellbeing have been documented following the acquisition of companion animals. Those adopting dogs undertook more exercise and reported reduced fear of crime and higher self-esteem (Mugford and Cominsky, Serpell). Siegal, (1990) comparing the number of GP visits by pet owners and non-owners found that owners generally made 15% fewer visits. A later study by Siegel (1993) examined the effect of stressful life events on GP visits. Non-owners increased their GP visits whereas owners did not.

Of particular interest are a series of studies demonstrating that interaction with companion animals has a positive influence on cardiovascular function. Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of chronic illness and death in the UK. The annual cost of cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease and stroke to the NHS is circa £13 billion, accounting for 8% of the NHS budget (British Heart Foundation). Provision of social support is linked to good cardiovascular health (Jenkins). Companion animals are an important part of our social networks.

Companion animal owners have both a lower risk for developing cardiovascular disease and experience improved outcomes should they suffer a heart attack or stroke. In a study of patients hospitalised due to heart attack, myocardial infarction or severe chest pain only 5.7% of the pet owners died compared to 28.2% of the non-owners (Friedman *et al* 1980). This early study only involved 92 patients and was later replicated in a more extensive study involving 369 patients with improved measures

(Friedmann and Thomas). In this study dog owners were 8.6 times more likely than non-owners to be alive 1 year later.

Whether pet ownership might influence risk factors for developing cardiovascular illness was studied at a screening centre in Australia (Anderson *et al*). 5741 people were assessed. Male pet owners were found to have significantly lower cholesterol, triglycerides, and systolic blood pressure. Female owners in the most at-risk age groups, i.e. menopausal and post-menopausal women, also had lower levels of risk factors.

Being in the presence of a dog has been shown to reduce stress and to mitigate against physiological responses when individuals are exposed to stressors. When subjects were asked to undertake stressful tasks, the presence of a dog resulted in lowering of the stress response. The presence of a human partner however increased the level of stress markers (Allen *et al* 1991).

Qureshi and colleagues extracted data on 4,435 Americans aged 30 to 75, from the second National Health and Nutrition Examination Study that took place from 1976 to 1980. 2,435 of the participants were current or former cat owners, while the remaining 2,000 had never had a cat. The researchers found that over a 10 year follow up period, cat owners showed a 30 per cent lower risk of death from heart attack or of experiencing a stroke compared to non-cat owners (Qureshi *et al*).

It has now been determined that levels of the neurotransmitters oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, prolactin and pheylalanine are elevated and the level of cortisol is lowered during human-animal interactions (Odendaal and Meintjes). Oxytocin has been traditionally linked with parturition and lactation. However recently it has been identified with having several key roles in cardiovascular regulation (Gutkowska and Jankowski). These include

- lowering blood pressure
- parasympathetic modulation
- vasodilation
- inotropic effects which reduce cardiac workload

Oxytocin also exhibits anti-inflammatory, anti -oxidative and metabolic effects. It acts as a cardiac protective mediator in pathological situations. In animals with artificially induced myocardial infarction, oxytocin promotes cardiac healing, maintains cardiac output and reduces inflammation. These effects could be the mechanism by which pet owners are less prone to cardiovascular illness and demonstrate better outcomes following heart attack and stroke.

Beetz et al also propose that activation of the oxytocin system is key to the positive psychological and physiological effects of human animal interactions. Oxytocin is also known to improve communication, induce feelings of trust and bonding.

Pet owners generally show greater fitness than non-owners. The influence of companion animals on the physical and psychological health of older people was analysed in 995 community living older people in a one-year longitudinal study. The Activities for Daily Living Scores (ADL) of non-owners deteriorated more on average than that of pet owners during the 1-year period. Ownership significantly modified the

relationship between social support and the change in psychological well-being over the 1year period (Raina *et al*).

Recently there has also been focus on the obesity epidemic and how companion animal ownership could help address this. The incidence of disease rises with obesity, especially cardiovascular disease (including stroke), diabetes and cancer (Wang *et al*). Health costs relating to obesity in the UK were £15.8 billion in 2007 (Public Health England). The medical costs of obese patients are 30% higher than non-obese (Withrow *et al*). The effectiveness of dog walking as an easy, low-cost intervention to maintain fitness and to tackle obesity is of increasing relevance in western society (Beck and Johnson).

Animal Assisted Interventions and Institutional settings

Animal assisted interventions can be introduced with great benefit to institutional settings as part of the therapeutic milieu. The animals involved should be carefully selected and can either be resident or visiting. SCAS members have extensive knowledge of AAI and the SCAS Code of Practice in AAI describes best practice approaches (SCAS). Dogs are most commonly involved as visiting animals. The two main charities involved in providing visits from dogs and handlers are Pets as Therapy and Therapet. The latter operates throughout Scotland. The dogs involved are carefully selected for health, temperament, and behaviour. A wide range of species can be involved as residents in institutions - again very careful selection is required.

SCAS members working in a range of institutional settings involving diverse client groups have consistently recorded positive changes arising from human animal interactions. These findings correlate with those of colleagues working overseas and include:

- normalisation of the institutional environment, more homely and relaxed
- improved communications between residents and between residents and staff
- less stress, more spontaneity, smiles and laughter
- better relationships between residents and between residents and staff
- residents become less demanding and easier to care for
- reduction in violence, aggression, and self-harm
- visitors visit more often and stay longer
- the facility is easier to manage
- reduced staff stress
- the animals provide a safe topic of conversation
- and opportunities for reminiscence

Thomas, a medical director of nursing homes with extensive experience of AAI has observed how the presence of animals in nursing homes can combat the deleterious effects of institutionalisation. Thomas identified "three plagues" affecting elders in nursing homes - loneliness, helplessness and boredom and states these account for the bulk of suffering among residents. He has addressed this by creating an elder-centred approach committed to creating a human habitat where life revolves around close and continuing contact with plants, animals, and children. Following the "edenisation" of his facilities he recorded a reduction in mortality; reduced need for psychotropic

medications; reduction in respiratory and urinary tract infections and fewer falls. There were significant cost savings (Thomas). This approach is referred to as The Eden Alternative, was introduced to the USA some 30 years' ago and is now found in many countries, including the UK. It is rapidly gaining in popularity.

There is an inconsistent approach in the UK to allowing older people to keep their pets when they move into nursing homes. Those that permit pets report that the many benefits outweigh the few problems. Sadly, there has been little progress since the issues were highlighted in a Joseph Rowntree study in 1993 (McNicholas).

Companion animals and dementia

There are currently 465,000 people with Alzheimer's in the UK, and it is estimated that a further 62,000 people are developing Alzheimer's each year (Office for National Statistics). The financial cost of dementia to the UK was calculated at over £23 billion in 2012 (Alzheimer Society). Companion animals are found to be beneficial in ameliorating the behavioural and psychological effects of dementia (BPSD). BPSD are common and a major cause of care giver ill health and cause of stress in residential care staff (Burns and Rabin).

Several studies have evaluated the impact of AAI on agitation and aggression in Special Care Units (SCUs), which are designed to manage the challenging behaviours of individuals with dementia. Edwards and Beck (2002) introduced aquaria to the dining room of three SCUs. Two facilities were treatment facilities, and one was a control, later crossing over to the treatment condition. The effect of aquaria was compared to an ocean image. Agitated residents became calmer and lethargic individuals became more alert in the presence of the aquaria. Nutritional intake increased in those residents exposed to the aquaria, with consequent weight gain. There was a reduction in need for nutritional supplements, with cost savings. Enders-Slegers found that the keeping of cats by nursing home residents suffering from dementia created a warmer, more comfortable environment for the residents, staff and visitors.

The presence of pets in the homes of community-based people with dementia is also found to promote calmness and reduce outbursts.

Public Health

There is a growing appreciation that serious issues affecting society require a multi-disciplinary approach. One Health is an approach to public health that unites medical, veterinary and other experts to address public health issues such as emerging diseases, zoonotic infections and biohazards. The benefits associated with pet ownership, assistance animals and animal assisted interventions are now included as an important aspect of One Health (Day). The concept of One Health asserts that the health and wellness of animals, people, and the environment are inextricably linked. In addressing issues relating to the human-animal bond a wide range of professionals can collaborate with veterinarians to seek solutions.

Older people, companion animals and housing

Despite a plethora of studies demonstrating clear benefits arising from the human animal bond older people are forced to relinquish an estimated 140,000 animal companions when moving to supported living (Anchor). Several members of parliament, including Paul Burstow, have sought introduce Private Member's Bills to provide older people the right to keep a companion animal, and thus bring the UK in line with several other countries. Despite goodwill and cross-party support legislation has not yet been enacted. Other governments, aware of the health and social benefits conferred by keeping pets, have enacted legislation to allow older people to keep their animals. Sadly, there has been little progress on this issue since the problems were highlighted in a Joseph Rowntree study in 1993 (McNicholas).

Some housing managers have concerns that older people might not be able to care for their pets or that they will be overrun with animals. SCAS members have extensive experience of these issues and are willing to share their expertise. When rules have changed to allow pet keeping, managers have been pleasantly surprised by the improvement in the environment and quality of life and creation of social capital (Hart and Mader, Wood). And the presence of an animal mitigates against relocation shock and helps people to adjust to a new situation. Only a minority of residents elect to keep a pet, but many tend to become involved in their care - sharing the care and making friends in the process.

Recommendations

With particular reference for the health, well-being and quality of life for older people, SCAS refers readers to the IAHAIO Declarations delivered in Geneva in 1995, in Prague in 1998, in Tokyo in 2007 and in Chicago in 2013. IAHAIO urges all international bodies concerned and all national and local governments to consider and activate the resolutions therein. These Declarations are appended.

SCAS advises of a particularly pressing need in the UK for the government to enact positive pets in housing legislation to protect the relationship between older people and their companion animals.

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Geneva Declaration

Preamble

Recent research is demonstrating the various benefits of companion animals to people's well-being, personal growth, and quality of life.

In order to enable their presence and ensure the harmonious companionship of animals in our lives, owners, and governments both have duties and responsibilities. IAHAIO members have adopted five fundamental resolutions at their General Assembly, held in Geneva on 5 September 1995. IAHAIO urges all international bodies concerned and all national governments to consider and activate the following resolutions.

Resolutions

1. To acknowledge the universal non-discriminatory right to pet ownership in all places and reasonable circumstances if the pet is properly cared for and does not contravene the rights of non-pet owners.
2. To take appropriate steps to ensure that the human environment is planned and designed to take the special needs and characteristics of pets and their owners into account.
3. To encourage the regulated presence of companion animals in schools and school curricula, and to work to convince teachers and educators of the benefits of this presence through appropriate training programmes.
4. To ensure regulated companion animals' access into hospitals, retirement and nursing homes, and other centres for the care of people of all ages who are in need of such contact.
5. To officially recognize as valid therapeutic interventions those animals that are specifically trained to help people overcome the limitations of disabilities; to foster the development of programs to produce such animals; and to ensure that education about the range of capabilities of these animals is included in the basic training of the health and social service professions.



IAHAIO Prague Declaration

Preamble

There is much research now available to prove that companion animals can add to the Quality of Life of the humans to whom they may provide practical assistance or therapy. IAHAIO members believe that those who train animals and deliver the service to others must ensure the Quality of Life of the animals involved. Programmes offering animal-assisted activities or animal-assisted therapy for the benefit of others should be governed by basic standards, regularly monitored, and be staffed by appropriately trained personnel.

IAHAIO members have therefore adopted four fundamental guidelines at their General Assembly held in Prague in September 1998. IAHAIO urges all persons and organizations involved in animal-assisted activities and/or animal-assisted therapy, and all bodies governing the presence of such programmes in their facilities to consider and abide by the following points.

Guidelines

1. Only domestic animals which have been trained using techniques of positive reinforcement, and which have been, and will continue to be, properly housed and cared for, are involved.
2. Safeguards are in place to prevent adverse effects on the animals involved.
3. The involvement of assistance and/or therapy animals is potentially beneficial in each case.
4. Basic standards are in place to ensure safety, risk management, physical and emotional security, health, basic trust and freedom of choice, personal space, appropriate allocation of programme resources, appropriate workload clearly defined roles, confidentiality, communication systems and training provision for all persons involved.

Organizations adhering to the above four guidelines will be invited to join IAHAIO as Affiliate Members.



IAHAIO 2007 Tokyo Declaration

Given the scientific and medical evidence proving the beneficial effects to human health and wellbeing arising from interactions with companion animals,

Given the biological and psychological evidence for the innate affinity of humans to nature, including other living beings and natural settings,

The members of the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations unanimously approved the following resolution and guidelines for action at the IAHAIO General Assembly held on October 5 2007 in Tokyo, Japan.

It is a universal, natural and basic human right to benefit from the presence of animals.

Acknowledgement of this right has consequences requiring action in various spheres of legislation and regulation. IAHAIO urges all international bodies and national and local governments:

1. To enact housing regulations which allow the keeping of companion animals if they can be housed properly and cared for adequately, while respecting the interest of people not desiring direct contact with such animals:
2. To promote access of specially selected and trained, healthy and clean animals to medical care facilities to participate in animal assisted therapy and/or animal-assisted activities;
3. To recognize persons and animals adequately trained in and prepared for animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted activity and animal-assisted education;
4. To allow the presence of companion animals in care/residential centres for people of any age, who would benefit from that presence
5. To promote the inclusion of companion animals in the school curricula according to the "IAHAIO Rio Declaration on Pets in Schools"



IAHAIO 2013 Chicago Declaration

Given the biological and psychological evidence for the innate affinity of humans to companion animals and a commitment to their health and welfare, the members of the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations overwhelmingly embrace the concept of "One Health," which asserts that the health and wellness of animals, people, and the environment are inextricably linked. The following resolution and guidelines for action were approved at the IAHAIO General Assembly held on July 20 2013 in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Companion animals play a key role in One Health through the documented health and social benefits of the human-animal bond, through the role of service/assistance animals and through exchanging information on the aetiology and treatment of naturally occurring disorders in companion animals and humans. Interactions between companion animals and humans can have a positive influence on human and animal health through similar processes. Acknowledgement of this declaration has consequences requiring action in various fields of legislation and regulation.

IAHAIO urges all international bodies and national and local governments:

1. To encourage cooperation between the medical, veterinary and allied health professions, social work, psychology, and education professions in both training and practice to promote the concept of the human-animal bond as an important concept of One Health in public health education.
2. To facilitate programs engaging companion animals and people, which are aimed at promoting health and wellness for both, including but not limited to animal-assisted interventions; the regulated presence of animals in schools, nursing homes and other settings; responsible pet ownership; positive policies toward pets in housing regulations; human-animal bond centred veterinary practice; human/animal support services and assistance/service animal programs.
3. To promote a better understanding of naturally occurring diseases and conditions in companion animals, and the dissemination of this knowledge to prevent and treat conditions occurring in humans and animals.
4. To promote standards on the wellbeing of animals in programs engaging animals and people, and to recognize the importance of the sentience of animals and professionals' responsibility towards them.

