

Paw Prints July '06
Furry family members
Dr. Pat Mahoney, DVM

Recently I attended a veterinary seminar where the speaker was explaining the increasing acceptance in our society of the family pet as a true family member. Studies, surveys, and personal experience attest to this trend. Pets are increasingly accepted as "furry children" in our homes. As with our human family, these relationships can provide joy, comfort, responsibilities and sometimes frustration and heartbreak.

The speaker felt that the trend to seek pets as family companions could be attributed to the Information Age changing the nuclear family structure. Children mature and often move to far away locations leaving both parents and themselves with an otherwise empty home. A pet in the house can give a lonely person emotional support, companionship and structure to their day,. Many studies have shown dramatically improved lifestyle and longevity for the widow/widower or cancer/heart surgery survivor when a pet is present in the household. I believe the benefits extend to the traditional family as well. Children learn respect for animals and experience unconditional love from a happy pet. Parents and young adults often find solitude and peacefulness from a cat curling up in their lap or by taking the family dog for a walk. And pets are often quite entertaining -- and just plain "fun!"

Pets also bring responsibilities to the relationship. A healthy, well-behaved pet takes a considerable amount of planning, effort, care, love and, yes, financial and emotional investment. The same Information Age that may have created this trend has also given us overwhelming amounts of information about training, nutrition, health-care and prevention. For some, the responsibilities involved may seem to be just "too much work." But for those of us who have chosen to accept and love pets in our homes, the rewards are so obvious as to make the above responsibilities literally a "small price to pay" for the benefits we receive.

As a pet practice veterinarian my role in this pet/family relationship has changed with this trend as well. In veterinary school I studied illness and still do, but my focus now is wellness. Most factors affecting a pet's wellness result from the decisions a pet owner will make about the care of their pet. It is my responsibility and that of my profession to treat and

prevent illness in our companion animals. It is also my responsibility to provide pet owners with the very best wellness recommendations available.

In future columns we'll discuss wellness recommendations, seasonal topics and answer pet ownership questions to help you maintain the special bond I hope you share with the "critter kid" in your household.

Dr. Pat Mahoney is the owner of American Animal Hospital in Neenah, an AAHA certified pet care clinic. To submit your pet related questions for a future column, go to the email link at www.ameranimal.com.