Round Table Discussion

The Veterinarian’s Role in Preventing and Controlling Disease in Exotic Animals in Assisted-Care Facilities

Much attention has been given recently to the human-animal bond and specifically to the positive effects pets, such as birds and other small exotic species, can have on residents of assisted-care facilities (ie, nursing homes, hospitals, and schools). Numerous studies have shown that interaction with animals brings both physical and social benefits to people with special needs. Interactions with animals can help older people psychologically in dealing with stressful events, in decreasing loneliness and boredom, and in increasing social contacts.1–9 Furthermore, human-animal interactions have been associated with decreased use of psychotropic medications in nursing home patients.1 Interactions with pets may also have physiologic benefits, including lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and stress levels, thereby reducing risk factors associated with cardiac disease.7,10,11 In addition, contact with animals has been shown to increase nurturing behavior and nonverbal communication in children.7

In 1977, the Delta Foundation was established under the direction of a physician, Dr Michael McCulloch, to recognize the importance of the human-animal bond and to emphasize the beneficial effects animals can have on human health and development. In the 1990s, the Foundation expanded the therapeutic role of animals in human health and service by training volunteers and health-care professionals in animal-assisted therapy and activities. The Foundation developed the Standards of Practice in Animal-Assisted Activities and Animal-Assisted Therapy12 to help aid in the establishment of therapy programs using animals. To date, the Foundation has funded at least 20 studies demonstrating how animals can affect human health and well being.

The fact that animals are now used commonly in both psychological and physical therapy programs in assisted-care facilities all over the world raises certain challenges for veterinarians entrusted with the care of these animals. Birds and other exotic species may carry zoonotic diseases, such as chlamydiosis, salmonellosis, bartonellosis, toxicocariasis, pasteurellosis, Q fever, and leptospirosis.6,13 Thus, it is essential that veterinarians ensure the health of animals in these facilities, for both the sake of the animals as well as the welfare of the patients (some of who may be immunocompromised) interacting with them. In addition, animals housed in these often busy facilities may be more prone to develop behavioral problems—another area in which veterinarians caring for these pets may have to intervene.

The therapeutic use of animals among populations with special needs has become so commonplace that the American Veterinary Medical Association has developed a position statement—the Wellness Guidelines for Animals Used in Animal-Assisted Activity, Animal-Assisted Therapy, and Resident Animal Programs14—to aid veterinarians in their roles in these facilities. This publication details the care veterinarians involved with these programs should provide and makes specific recommendations for protection of animal health and the prevention of zoonotic disease.

The focus of this round table discussion is the veterinarian’s role in helping to prevent and control disease in exotic animals kept in assisted-care facilities. I have invited 4 participants, all of whom have had experience either directly with animals in these facilities or in the drafting of AVMA or Delta Foundation literature relating to this topic. The participants are Merry Crimi, DVM, Gladstone Veterinary Clinic, Milwaukee, OR, USA; John C. New, Jr, DVM, MPH, Dipl ACVPM, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, USA; Susan Orosz, PhD, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian), Dipl ECAMS, Perrysburg Animal Care, Perrysburg, OH, USA; and John L. Pitts, DVM, The Eden Alternative, Sherburne, NY, USA. I hope this dialogue will spark future communication about this controversial, evolving veterinary issue.

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