

New perspectives on bonding

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For many years, several SCAS members have been actively involved in delivering bond-centred veterinary services and reported on the many benefits of such an approach. SCAS, together with Hill's Pet Nutrition, will be producing a series of eight articles for publication in the *Veterinary Review*, to raise awareness of bond-centred practice within the veterinary profession. This is the first article which was published in the October issue of *Veterinary Review*, reproduced here with their permission.

There is increasing interest in how an appreciation of the facets of the human-companion animal bond (HCAB) can positively influence patient care in veterinary practice and can, in turn, bond the client and practice more effectively. The HCAB approach addresses the needs of both the animal patient and the practice client and also has many additional benefits for veterinary practice and its staff. These include increased levels of client retention and compliance, increased job satisfaction, reduced staff stress, and enhanced perception of the practice in the community. The approach also provides ways for staff to identify and prevent animal neglect. This first article in a series exploring the importance of the human-companion animal bond in veterinary practice, will start by looking at what is meant by the human-companion animal bond and its relevance for the veterinary profession.

What is the human-companion animal bond?

Over the past two decades the term human-animal bond (HAB), has become "a popular way of referring to the types of attachment and relationships that exist between people and their pets," (Lagoni, Butler and Hetts, 1994, p.5). In the USA the term 'human-animal bond' is used for all positive human-animal interactions including those with companion animals, whereas in the UK, the human-pet bond is generally referred to as the 'human-companion animal bond' (HCAB) (Dawson, 2006b, 2007). The terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Although people will probably always refer to 'pets and pet keeping', the now preferred term by researchers is *companion animal*. This term infers a relationship where there are benefits for both parties (Lagoni *et al.* 1994).

The HCAB is not a new phenomenon as Grey (2006, p.2) points out, "The human-animal bond is timeless. It is defined by history, cultural traditions and family ties and by our need to feel attached."

History of the human-animal bond

Close relationships between people and animals date from prehistory. Evidence of possible bonds between people and animals can be seen in cave paintings, ancient pictures and art throughout the ages (Enders-Slegers, 2000). Applying recent DNA techniques, researchers now estimate that domestication of the dog may have been as early as 100,000 years ago (Vila *et al.* 1997). To put that into context, man is thought to have evolved as *Homo sapiens* between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago. The chance finding of a cat skeleton in Cyprus in 2004, buried close to the remains of a teenage boy, suggests that cats were probably domesticated some 5,000 years earlier than previously thought, about 9,500 years ago – around the time we were changing from hunter gatherers to farmers. (Pennisi, 2004; Dawson, 2006a, 2007).

Over the past two decades, research into the effects of the HCAB has resulted in the introduction of many programmes to help people with diverse health, social and educational needs; for example, increasing numbers of companion animals undertake visits to older people in nursing homes and children in hospices, and also play a role in offender rehabilitation. Many

dogs are now involved therapeutically in the care of people with dementia, psychiatric patients and people experiencing mental health problems.

This is not a new concept. The Ancient Greeks kept dogs in their healing temples and advocated horseback riding for people suffering from melancholy and to lift the spirits of the terminally ill. The first recorded introduction of companion animals to an institution in the UK was at The York Retreat, a progressive psychiatric facility established in 1796. (Tuke, 1813). The therapeutic value of companion animals was also recognised by Florence Nightingale. "A small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially." (Nightingale, 1859).

Today, companion animals are perceived by many as legitimate family members (Cohen, 2002). A fall in human birth rates in the western world, increased longevity and greater social mobility have been cited as reasons for the change in status and popularity of companion animals as an alternative to 'family' (Barton Ross and Baron-Sorensen, 2007; Dawson, 2007).

Theories explaining the HCAB

A range of theories can be applied to understanding the HCAB from attachment theory, a framework normally used to explain affectionate relationships between people (Bowlby, 1969, 1979, 1980) to self psychology, a school of psychoanalytic theory (Brown, 2003; Dawson, 2007; Kohut, 1971). Perhaps the most widely applied theory in understanding HCAB is biophilia (Wilson, 1993, p.31). "Biophilia if it exists, and I believe it exists, is the innately emotional affiliation of human beings with organisms." Biophilia is rooted in what Wilson believes to be an innate human affinity and drive to connect with the natural

world and is grounded in the belief that bonding with animals is a beneficial adaptation for human beings.

The human-companion animal bond and veterinary practice

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has a statement defining the HAB and its relevance at the centre of veterinary practice:

- The human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours that are essential to the health and well-being of both.
- This includes but is not limited to emotional, psychological and physical interactions of people, animals and the environment. The veterinarian's role in the human-animal bond is to maximize potentials of this relationship between people and animals.

(AVMA, 2006).

The AVMA (2006) further recognises that the HAB has major significance

for veterinary medicine because, as veterinary medicine serves society, it fulfils both human and animal needs.

Although there is growing interest in these issues within the veterinary profession in the UK, it is still in its infancy and there are, as yet, no formal statements from veterinary bodies on the HAB approach. Undergraduate students are offered optional lectures and workshops on topics such as non-accidental injury and pet loss, but there is little, if any, inclusion in the veterinary curriculum.

The importance of understanding the HCAB from the clients' perspective

Understanding and responding to the needs created by HCAB makes sound business sense by encouraging client loyalty to the practice, enabling improved communication and facilitating compliance with treatment protocols. Recent research, (Dawson, 2007) investigating human-companion animal relationships has identified what has become known as the substantive facets of the HCAB,



essentially revealing the 'ingredients' that make up a close human-companion animal relationship:

- **Exclusivity** – a sense of having a 'special' bond with, being chosen/preferred by a companion animal
- **Caring, nurturing role** – this included rescuing animals and the nurturing of young animals
- **Personality/perceived individuality of the companion animal** – companion animal perceived and related to as individual, irreplaceable and unique, seen as possessing a 'personality'
- **Perceived reciprocity** – perceived two-way communication, talking to a companion animal, mutual trust, and shared affection
- **Companion animal family member status** – this extends to the use of human familial metaphors to describe human-companion animal relationships eg like a brother/sister, like a child, or surrogate parent, (revealing the relational qualities experienced by the owner/caregiver)
- **Duration of time spent together** – length of ownership/care-giving, amount of time spent together during the day
- **Proximity (emotional and physical)** – a sense of closeness/maintained need for actual physical proximity of the companion animal emotional proximity
- **Compatibility** – with caregiver's own personality (either complimentary or similar), appearance and behaviour. (Dawson, 2007)

Practitioners will be very familiar with clients who appear to have especially close relationships with their pet, often appearing 'reliant' on the presence of that animal. This may be due to social isolation because of personal bereavement, divorce or

impaired mobility. These clients can be particularly hard to communicate with because of their degree of attachment and may make what appears to us to be irrational decisions about their pet's care. A very common scenario would be the owner with an obese/overweight companion animal who insists on overfeeding despite knowing this is causing potential damage to the animal's health.

Being aware of and understanding the substantive facets of the HCAB can be invaluable in this scenario to help us understand how the client feels about their pet and how this influences their behaviours. These principles can also be very useful in palliative treatment and end of life care, within euthanasia decision making and planning of the event itself eg where this will take place, who will be present? In situations where there are threats to the HCAB eg a companion animal behaving aggressively to its owner, mapping personally important facets of the bond can be helpful in locating the origins of the problem, which more times than not are connected with the relationship between pet and person – the HCAB.

The bond-centred practice

Placing the human-companion animal bond at the centre of veterinary practice is encapsulated in what has become known as a 'bond-centred' approach to veterinary practice (Lagoni, Morehead, Brannan and Butler, 2001). This approach focuses on people and the relationships they form with their companion animals, with each other and with the veterinary professionals caring for their companion animals. It involves recognising and responding to the unique emotional needs generated from the HCAB, in ways that benefit the animal patient, the client, the veterinary staff, the community

and animal welfare in general. This will be the subject of the next article in this series.

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Are you a vet in practice?

SCAS currently delivers lectures and workshops on bond-centred veterinary practice and is looking to expand this training in 2008.

If you currently adopt this approach, and would like to contribute to our lecture and training activities, we would like like to hear from you.

Please contact the SCAS director on info@scas.org.uk or tel. 01993 825597.

NEWS

The Rita High Award

Earlier this year we shared the very sad news that Rita High, a long-standing honorary SCAS member, had died. Rita had an unwavering commitment to supporting the bond between older people and pets and was an inspiration to us all.

At the SCAS AGM earlier this year, the SCAS chairman announced that SCAS would like to honour Rita's memory by initiating an annual award in her name. This award would be made to a nominated individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the development of the bond between older people and pets.

The SCAS board of trustees would now like to invite suggestions from

the SCAS membership as to what the nature of this award should be. Please contact the SCAS director with

your ideas. Email: info@scas.org.uk or tel. 01993 825597.

