



Pets are a natural remedy

Fluffy, Fido and Tweety and their friends pay for their keep by boosting their owners' mental and physical health

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WHILE Bella isn't a public health expert, the miniature schnauzer does lend a paw to someone who is, her owner Lisa Wood.

According to Wood, while she and her human colleagues worldwide believe that pet ownership produces enormous personal and community health benefits, Bella is a wiggly, furry reminder that it's time to bring scientific rigour to a wealth of intriguing, often contradictory findings.

"It's important to drill down into the benefits," claims Wood, deputy director of the University of Western Australia's Centre for the Built Environment and Health.

That's so, as research dating to the 1980s suggests that pet ownership has positive benefits on people, for instance promoting cardiovascular and mental health and reducing allergies and stress. Unfortunately, many of the studies haven't been replicated, aren't considered solid or produce equivocal results. Similarly, anecdotal evidence abounds about the effectiveness of pet therapy in the management of conditions as diverse as depression, spinal injury, autism and Alzheimer's disease.

Recently, though, researchers such as Wood have begun following up the leads, using more convincing methods. Last year, for instance, researchers with Japan's Azuba University demonstrated that after dog owners play with their pets they experience a surge in oxytocin, a feel-good hormone linked to bonding and infant care.

And in the US, a team led by Sharon Milberger of the Centre for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention reported last year that more than a quarter of pet owners who smoke would try to quit if they knew smoking

harmed their cat, bird or dog.

More significantly, University of Melbourne researcher Bruce Headey has teamed up with German researcher Markus Grabka to quantify the health correlates of pet ownership using national survey data in Australia, Germany and, surprisingly, China.

Headey, with the university's Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, explains: "China is of special interest because until 1992 pets were banned as a silly bourgeois extravagance. Since they lifted the ban, dog ownership is about 10 per cent in big cities... Our sample of 3000 [people] shows that when dogs were introduced to people with no history of pet ownership, the effect on health was huge."

According to Heady, data from China's "natural experiment" backs similar results from Australia and Germany. Compared with pet-free people, those who live with other species benefit from better overall health, get more exercise, sleep better, take fewer days off work and see their doctor less.

"This has quite big implications for health savings," Headey claims. "If we suddenly abolished [Australia's] dogs and cats and their owners started going to the doctor the same as the rest of the population, health costs would go up." How much? "That would jack up health costs by \$3.86 billion [annually]."

Meanwhile, Peggy McCardle — chief of the Maryland-based National Institutes of Health's child development and behaviour branch — and her deputy chief James Griffin have initiated a human-animal interaction research program to nail down the benefits of pets. In 2008 they tea-

med up with the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition, a British division of pet food giant Mars, to fund rigorous scientific study in the field.

It's a move welcomed by Wood, a self-described "real world-oriented" researcher who wants experts to have enough solid data to make health policy recommendations. To that end she's trying to unravel the mechanisms by which pets affect community and social networks, which in turn influence human health.

"That's pretty nebulous," she laughs, adding that Bella inspires her to find tangible ways of quantifying the indirect, as well as the direct, benefits of pet ownership.

Case in point: dog walking. Both Wood and her colleague Hayley Christian of UWA's school of public health have con-

ducted studies, crunched numbers and analysed the benefits to individuals and neighbourhoods of "dog-walking behaviour".

Christian says: "Dog owners are physically more active than non-walkers and are more likely to meet exercise requirements." Along with UWA co-workers Matthew Knuiman and Billie Giles-Corti, she last year published the results of a study involving 773 Perth residents. They found that compared with recreational walkers, dog walkers do enough walking to meet the recommended 31 minutes of weekly walking.

Moreover, since they followed walking and non-walking participants for a year and included people who'd just acquired a canine companion, Christian's group an-



COLIN MURTY

Lisa Wood, seen above with her pet Bella, is trying to unravel the mechanisms by which pets affect community and social networks

answered a long-running question: are dog owners simply more active than non-owners or does getting a dog make them more active?

“The biggest fact was the dog. The dog provided the daily cue,” says Christian, who hopes to follow up the findings with a health promotion program involving veterinarians as advocates for dog-walking.

Dogs are social glue, Wood adds. Also collaborating with Giles-Corti, as well as UWA’s Max Bulsara and Darcy Bosch, she used a survey of 339 WA residents to confirm the ripple effect of pets on communities. Pets of whatever species — from dogs and cats to birds, fish, guinea pigs, pocket pigs, rabbits and even snakes — boost co-operation, trust, civic engagement and a sense of “suburb

friendliness”, they reported.

“Like the baby in the pram, sometimes it’s the pet that precipitates interaction,” Wood says, noting that looking after pets while neighbours go away can be as effective as taking pets to the park. It’s the presence of pet animals in a community, seen or unseen, that counts, claims Wood, who’s detailing her work in an upcoming book by the NICHD, *The Role of Pets in Children’s Lives*.

Heady and Grabka have also contributed to a forthcoming NICHD book, *How Animals Affect Us*. Their answer is no surprise. Despite the outlay on pet food, visits to the vet and the occasional animal accessory, pets are worth the money. They keep people healthy. They’re also fun to have around. Ask Bella.