Introduction: It’s All About The Cat: What, Why and How

Thirty-three percent of all US households recognize and enjoy the benefits of cat ownership and enjoy the attributes—“cattributes”—of this whimsical and magical companion, from its athletic and intellectual capabilities to being bark-free and self-grooming. One study (http://www.hhs.gov/news/healthbeat/2009/08/20090811a.html) reported by the Minnesota Stroke Institute showed that people who owned a cat any time during their lifetime were 40% less likely to have cardiac-related deaths than people who did not (and no such correlation was made with dog owners).

The number of owned cats in the United States has been greater than the number of owned dogs since 1990. According to the American Pet Products Association, since that time, the pet cat population has grown 54% from an estimated 60.8 million in 1990 to 93.6 million in 2008, compared with dogs at 52.7 million in 2006 to 77.5 million in 2008, which represents a 47% growth. Irrespective of the increase in feline popularity, cats have some challenges that can be overcome. Nationwide, animal care and control facilities agree that cats are overwhelmingly the most numerous species relinquished to shelters and, although reporting methods and individual results vary widely, the animal welfare community acknowledges that nationwide for every four cats that come into a facility, only one finds a permanent home.

Additionally, even in the face of the growth in the feline population, veterinary care for cats has declined. As identified in the AVMA 2007 US Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook, the mean expenditure per cat was $81 in 2006, a slight decrease from $85 in 2001. Over this same period, veterinary expenditures on dogs increased from $179 in 2001 to $200 in 2006, and the Consumer Price Index increased by a compound annual rate of 2.6%. Declining and disturbing economic trends continue. One report of 300 veterinary practices using the same practice management software system showed a 1.7% decline in feline visits over the first 8 months in 2010 as compared with 2009. This translates into fewer cats receiving appropriate health care.

Overall, fewer resources are allocated to feline research, although with organizations such as Morris Animal Foundation (through the MAF Happy, Healthy Cats campaign), Winn Feline Foundation, Cornell Feline Health Center, and the American Association of Feline Practitioners, more feline-specific research efforts are specifically targeted.

Historically, peer-reviewed scientific journals with the largest distribution are typically multi-species, with feline data often presented as a subset of canine findings and statistics. Now in its tenth year, Elsevier’s Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery, and the 2010 addition of Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery Clinical Practice has led that publication to be one of the most highly regarded veterinary journals throughout the world.

Other opportunities to promote feline health in North America have been identified in recent years, and veterinary organizations such as American Association of Feline Practitioners, American Animal Hospital Association, and American Veterinary Medical Association have developed feline-specific resources and educational opportunities, including joining forces on the CATalyst Council (www.catalystcouncil.org) to promote increased awareness of cats’ attributes and needs and to expand cat ownership and health care. These organizations, along with the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators, American Humane Association, foundations, media, and commercial corporations are examples of how forming partnerships to promote feline health can be a catalyst and create change for cats.

This issue of TCAM is all about the cat. Readers will find information that spans the spectrum from critical foundational to leading-edge topics. Dr. Rodan outlines how understanding and managing cats’ responses to fear and stress, veterinary teams can teach owners to transport cats and have their practices become more “cat friendly,” which will allow more cats to be seen by veterinarians. Dr. Fitzgerald’s comprehensive description of lily toxicity, Dr. Lee’s thorough review and explanation of feline heartworm disease, and Dr. Herron’s extensive article on the varied causes and cures for feline inappropriate elimination are tremendous tools for every veterinarian who treats cats. Dr. Kerwin’s new findings on feline osteoarthritis, Dr. Brodbelt’s identification of reasons for anesthetic complications in cats, and Dr. Lyons’ article on genetic disorders and DNA testing in cats all show that feline research is indeed on a good track!

It is our hope that you will put the information in these articles to use to help more cats. Providing a feline friendly and knowledgeable facility and recommending the basic wellness needs for cats—such as age- and lifestyle-appropriate vaccines and diagnostic testing, nutritional assessment at every visit, parasite treatment and prevention, education of owners about the scientifically shown benefits of microchipping, and even discussion of the reasons for having pet health insurance—will lead to more cats in more homes, where they will receive the love and care they both need and deserve!

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