

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Cats, Canines & Cures: The Changing Face of Animal Health

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Research is defined as “careful or diligent search.” Animal research should be done with extreme respect for all animals – owned and un-owned – to advance health and welfare. The pet-owning and animal-loving public seem to understand that investigative work is required to improve the future health and temperament of animals. In a survey of 2,001 pet owners, conducted by Yankelovich for Purina, 10% of dog owners and 8% of cat owners ranked “increasing funding for research to improve pet health” as the issue of greatest importance. This was the fourth most significant issue cited by the respondents. The top issue for both dog (56%) and cat (63%) owners was to reduce pet over-population. Thus, the goals of the Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs have tremendous public support. Through diligence and good work, you have much to offer.

When discussing cats, canines and cures, we should also discuss myths, methods and measures. What were some of the prior myths that led owners to leave their animals unaltered? For example, there was the myth that bitches would be calmer if they first became mothers. Trust me, as a mother, it never worked for me!

What are some of the current myths that suggest neutering an animal will prevent pet overpopulation? For example, will producing a safe non-surgical sterilant or contraceptive be the universal remedy (panacea) in reducing the number of unwanted dogs and cats in shelters? If so, why do Scandinavian countries, where dogs are not routinely neutered, have no dog overpopulation problem? In 1990, I was invited to give several lectures in Stockholm and submitted the syllabus for my presentations. One of my lectures was to include an hour discussion on pet overpopulation. The organizers of the conference called and kindly told me that all my topics looked great except the one on pet overpopulation. Since Sweden did not have this problem, I could forgo the lecture.

Hearing this, I asked the organizers if the veterinarians would allow me the hour to talk to them – so that they could help me understand why pet overpopulation was not a problem in Sweden, perhaps helping me address the issue back home. They consented, and I learned a great deal from these colleagues. Pet overpopulation was far more complex than I had ever imagined. It involved not only “too many births,” but “too many relinquishments.” It involved “responsibility” over “rights” of pet ownership. Upon returning to the U.S., I helped co-found the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, attempting to address those multiple factors leading to the problem.

What are those other unidentified myths that you must seek to understand to be successful with your goals? How might beliefs be changed with new information? I was back in Sweden this fall, serving as an opponent for the Ph.D. thesis defense (canine

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sterilization). While in Sweden, I had the opportunity to meet with Agria, an animal insurance company. Because over half of all dogs in Sweden have health insurance, Agria has excellent stats on animal health. One in four intact female dogs insured requires surgery for pyometra – a disease of the uterus that cannot physically occur in dogs that are spayed. Thus, Swedish colleagues gave me some excellent advice in 1990, so this year I was able to ask them a critical question: “If 25% of intact dogs require surgery for a serious disease, would not routinely spaying dogs at a young age be less costly and more humane?” We can learn from one another, from one another’s cultures.

Addressing diverse cultures and being responsive to diverse beliefs will be important for your success. What methods will you develop and will pet owners embrace them? I remember once attending a seminar in the late 1970s when a canine contraceptive was introduced by a major pharmaceutical industry. Many millions of dollars were spent on development of this product and free samples were given to academic theriogenologists (reproduction specialists) at the launch.

I never used up the free product. My clients did not embrace the product. Some feared side effects. Others did not want to administer a drug daily. Will your product be as safe as the existing gold standard? If not, why would an owner select it? If hormones are not eliminated, and the risk of pyometra, mammary tumors or prostatic disease remains, why would a veterinarian recommend it? Will your product be less expensive than the existing gold standard? If not, why would an owner purchase it? Even if safe and less expensive, will veterinarians (trusted professionals) recommend it? It took years for the veterinary profession to consider that prepubertal gonadectomy might be a good thing to do – something that is relatively quick and safe.

One of my parents is an eternal optimist and one an eternal pessimist. Thus, I always consider the reasons why something will not work and then I optimistically and carefully strive to make it work. I applaud the Alliance’s work, their board, the focus that Joyce Briggs has brought to this process, and your willingness to convene industry, nonprofits, scientists (physiology, biology, social science, psychology), marketing and others to address an issue of great significance. Just keep asking questions of one another – hard questions. For as you debate and discuss, you hold the potential for identifying a great solution. How will you measure your success? I recently attended a Leadership Conference at the Harvard Business School and learned that output does not equate to outcome. Your success will not necessarily be in doses of a product sold, but in terms of a problem solved. Metrics will be key.

Always think about novel approaches to old problems. Always listen to one another. When I was teaching at Colorado State University in the 1980s, I sometimes thought that I learned much more from my students than they learned from me. One day, I was lecturing to a class of veterinary students on pet overpopulation. This was when we thought that one in four dogs and cats were euthanized each year because of pet overpopulation. As a board-certified theriogenologist (specialist in animal reproduction), I would always include an hour on this issue. One young man raised his hand and said,

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“So, you’re saying that up to 25% of dogs and cats die each year because of this problem.”

I replied, “Yes.” The young man continued, “So, what would the veterinary profession do if one in four dogs or cats died of a specific disease each year?” I replied, “Well, when canine parvovirus was identified as a new disease in the 1970s, the veterinary community rallied to find a prevention and treatment and canine parvovirus did not kill 25% of the dog population.” Morris Animal Foundation funded the original research, pharmaceutical companies worked with academic institutions to bring a vaccine to market, veterinary associations developed rapid communications and continuing education programs to address prevention and therapy, veterinarians worked with breeders, and much more.”

The young man continued: “So, did the profession respond to canine parvovirus primarily because this disease affected animals who were owned and those in animal shelters being euthanized were not? One had paying owners and the other did not?” This question prompted me to begin working with national humane and veterinary organizations. Getting these groups together was not easy; humane organizations thought that veterinarians should offer free spay/neuter to dogs and cats. Veterinarians wondered why anyone would think such a thing ... when did pediatricians offer free ear surgeries to children?

However, when the groups came together, they quickly identified some common ground. All groups wanted animals to remain in their homes for their natural lifetimes. Animals could survive through the gallant efforts of humane groups, and animals could thrive through the excellent care of veterinarians. As every veterinarian knows, clients are likely to spend more money when a pet ages ... so why wouldn’t this be win/win? Thus, listen to everyone. It might be your mother who gives you the best advice!

Novel new approaches will guide your efforts. Leroy Hood, considered the father of an emerging branch of science called systems biology, believes that health and disease will be deconstructed in the near future. The canine genome has already been sequenced. The equine genome is to be completed by year’s end. The cat genome is already being worked on. While the genome is merely a list of parts, decoding the way it works is the key to curing disease.

Morris Animal Foundation has launched a large multi-institutional effort to address canine cancer. As you may be aware, most dog breeds differentiated in a few hundred years. As this occurred, cancer segregated among breeds. Scottish terriers are at risk to develop bladder cancer, greyhounds to bone cancer, golden retrievers to lymphosarcoma and hemangiosarcoma, pugs to mast cell cancer, and so on. We can now begin to dream about solving the cancer riddle, identifying the genetic, nutritional and environmental risk factors for cancer. Are there people who are naysayers and believe this is a crazy idea? Of course! Are there those who believe that a safe and effective sterilant cannot be found, much less commercialized? Of course! That does not mean you should stop trying.

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Morris Animal Foundation was established in 1948 by a veterinarian – Dr. Mark Morris. He was a visionary who once gave a lecture at a national veterinary conference, suggesting that health and disease in dogs and cats might be predicted by evaluating blood and urine from the animals. Some of the veterinarians in the audience thought him a bit crazy. But he did not give up, and we all know that routine complete blood counts, serum chemistry profiles and urinalyses are critical diagnostic tools for predicting health in companion animals. Later acknowledged for his vision, Dr. Morris became the first president of the American Animal Hospital Association and also president of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Never give up on those crazy ideas!

You must ask a critical question: “What great thing would you do if you knew that you could not fail?” This will be worth serious contemplation, because in fact there is no failure.

Tom Edison once mentioned to reporters that he had tried over 10,000 materials as filaments for his new invention, the electric light bulb. One reporter asked how the young inventor maintained his persistence in the face of so many failures. Edison responded, “Failure? I didn’t fail. What I did was successfully eliminate 10,000 elements that were unacceptable for my needs.”

The list of people like Edison is large. Elvis Presley was turned down to sing in his high school glee club. Ronald Reagan was turned down for the lead role of a presidential candidate in a play, *The Best Man*, because he lacked the look of a president. Eighteen publishers turned down Richard Bach’s book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, before Macmillan finally published it in 1970. By 1975 it had sold more than 7 million copies in the United States alone. Albert Einstein did poorly in elementary school and failed his first college entrance examination at Zurich Polytechnic. Western Union turned down exclusive rights to an invention, thought by the president to be a useless toy. That toy turned out to be the Alexander Graham Bell telephone.

As you are aware, Morris Animal Foundation recently issued a Request for Proposals, distributed by the Alliance for Contraception in Dogs and Cats, announcing a restricted gift from a donor who wanted to provide funding (\$170,000) to someone who has a great idea (dream), sound science, and vision for addressing canine overpopulation through research. We are honored to support your dreams. On behalf of the world’s animals that our Foundation serves, we wish you well and thank you! When I was in Sweden this fall, the young man from Mexico told me that people in the Mayan culture believe that for a human soul to enter heaven, it must be ushered there by the soul of a dog. You have important work to do for the souls of these precious dogs and cats. Helping to cure overpopulation is indeed very important work. Thank you.