

December 2011

The cost of companionship

It's a fact. New Zealand is a nation of animal lovers. But in the current economic environment, the costs relating to pet ownership are even more important when considering taking on an animal— especially when the cute kitten or puppy is a Christmas present.

NZVA President, Dr Gavin Sinclair says: "Regardless of whether you're thinking about giving an animal as a gift, or pet ownership has been a long-held desire of your own, even a healthy pet can cost thousands of dollars over its lifetime. People need to weigh this against why they want an animal in the first place."

Research by the New Zealand Companion Animal Council (NZCAC) showed that, on average, a cat will cost \$466 a year, while dogs are more than double this at \$1,047. The research shows that after food, which accounts for around half of all expenditure on our furry friends, people spend the greatest amount on veterinary services and healthcare.

Total spending on veterinary services accounts for a total of \$358m, or 23% of the \$1.584bn spent each year on our companion animals. Healthcare products make up \$166m or 10% of the money spent.

Over the last year, 85% of dog owners and 67% of cat owners have taken their pets to the vet. The average annual expenditure on veterinary services for cats is \$108 per animal, totalling \$157m. Dog owners spend more per pet at \$262, totalling \$188m a year.

While this may point to the fact that we're taking good care of our pets, the tough economic conditions have given rise to some not so comforting trends.

Dr Sinclair adds: "Companion animals are visiting the vet less often, which is resulting in greater instances of diseases related to obesity, dental disease and flea and tick infestations."

The NZ Veterinary Association wishes all our friends, colleagues and stakeholders a very happy and safe festive season and a happy and prosperous New Year.



From the President's desk

With the announcement of the new government, I'd like to welcome back the Hon David Carter as the Minister of Primary Industries. Over the last few years we've developed a strong and constructive relationship with the Minister that we look forward to progressing.



We will continue to work with the government to promote the role of the veterinary profession in

New Zealand's agriculture sector. The industry is the backbone of our economy and cannot flourish without having the profession as a key player. Veterinary input and the economic wellbeing of our primary sector is crucial to New Zealand's own prosperity.

Our relationship with livestock owners is undergoing a paradigm shift, away from the last resort 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff', to a much more health promotion and illness preventative role.

Our responsibilities must remain focused on the concept of 'wellness' which supports the productive, profitable, and sustainable growth of our livestock industries. The proactive care and management of animals will deliver against all of these objectives and, in turn, contribute to the overarching objective of "maximising export opportunities and improving sector productivity" for our livestock industries.

As we highlighted in our August Vets@Work newsletter, we're making a number of recommendations to the Minister to reiterate the importance of initiatives such as Primary Growth Partnerships, the Rural Veterinary Bonding Scheme, the Animal Welfare Act review, the national Animal Welfare Strategy and the Animal Welfare Compliance Plan and the amendment of the Veterinarians Act 2005.

But animals are not just the lifeblood of our economy, they are also essential to our health and wellbeing as companions.

We own more pets per household than any other comparable country. Research shows that our cats and dogs become part of the household, members of the family. They bring us relaxation and replenishment, and dogs and cats in particular give us a great deal of pleasure.

There are well-documented health benefits of owning a pet, such as reduced instances of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. They can help children develop respect, self esteem, cognitive development and improved social skills.

The benefits of a human/animal relationship have become more

More importantly, there is the possibility that the financial pressures on households are impacting on de-sexing rates. This is an important issue that may lead to more unwanted kittens and puppies and also poses a significant threat to our wildlife.

“A single unspayed female cat and her unspayed female kittens are considered capable of producing 3,200 kittens in just one year. Many end up becoming stray or feral. They can have a devastating effect on our native wildlife.”



Pet insurance a growing trend

It is a sad, but very true fact, that every year two out of three pets will require treatment for an accident or illness. This means that these owners will be facing bills they haven't budgeted for. And unlike medical bills for humans, there are no government subsidies for vet visits, consultations, pet medication or surgery.

However the number of New Zealanders taking out pet insurance is on the rise as people try to offset the potential for expensive, and unexpected vet bills when their treasured pet falls sick or gets injured. An awful dilemma that many uninsured pet owners face is whether or not to even go ahead with treatment.

“The recent increase in pet insurance uptake shows that people are concerned about making sure they can care for their pets should the worst happen. People are now more concerned about getting the right care for their animal rather than cutting corners and worrying about cost,” says Julie Hood, CEO of NZVA.

“It means people don't have to compromise on treatment when all they want is the best for their pet.”



recognised and accepted in the modern world in a variety of forms. As well as valued members of the family, pets are also used to bring joy to those less fortunate in their roles as therapy animals. And this doesn't include the essential work that seeing-eye, mobility and hearing dogs perform for their disabled owners.

With 68% of households owning a companion animal of some sort, New Zealand's vets not only provide care for our pets, by proxy they're helping us stay healthy too. Animal owners and veterinarians working together can protect the health and wellbeing of all companion animals over the course of their life. If our pets receive regular check-ups, they are more likely to live a happy, longer and healthier life that, in turn, improves our own welfare.

So, 2012 looks set to be a busy year as we look to strengthen the positioning of veterinarians as a profession that has a significant role to play in New Zealand's health and prosperity.

In the meantime, I wish you all the best for the festive season.

Dr Gavin Sinclair
President NZVA

Solutions to lamb deaths sought

Despite extraordinary weather extremes in recent years, New Zealand's average lamb mortality rate still compares favourably with indoor systems in other countries. This is largely due to the inherent ability of New Zealand's sheep to lamb easily and the lack of disease that can result from indoor lambing.



New Zealand sheep farmers generally care deeply about their stock, and most make inordinate efforts to resolve the nutritional and shelter issues that arose out of storms.

Given those storms, and the vicious polar event this year, discussion in the veterinary profession has been stimulated around the role we play in encouraging farmers to adjust and develop farming practice and systems that are more robust in welfare terms.

Dr Gavin Sinclair, President of NZVA, says the solutions are not easy as modern farming systems involve complex interactions between the physical environment, soils, fertiliser, pasture, management, genetics, economics, animals and weather.

“Simply building more shelter will not be enough. In last year's storms, given their severity and duration, the lee, or entry side of any shelter would have become a quagmire and any lamb born there would have quickly died. Furthermore, there is evidence that not only were lamb losses higher in paddocks with shelter belts, but more ewes were lost as they were sheltering and not grazing, and thus they succumbed to metabolic diseases.

Veterinarians are debating the solutions between themselves and with their clients. Lamb welfare is paramount, and it is clear resolutions will involve a range of initiatives covering stock protection, improved production through quality feed along with flexibility with calving and lambing dates.

“The bottom lines are animal welfare and perceptions about farming practices in our export markets. If consumers think our animal welfare practices are not up to standard, barriers to export of meat and wool will be erected irrespective of the statistics that show our practices result in no more losses than are experienced in indoor lambing barns.

“Furthermore, veterinary ethics demand that veterinarians don't

NZVA offices will be closed

The NZVA offices will be closed over the Christmas period between December 23rd and January 4th.

stand by and let what appears to be increasingly abnormal weather events lead to such tragic losses again in the future,” Dr Sinclair adds.

“The NZVA’s Animal Welfare Strategy defines the role of veterinarians in identifying specific welfare issues and using our knowledge and expertise to proactively address them. It is our role in helping to protect the reputation of our primary industries and NZ.”

Thanks to Dr Seamus Sullivan and Dr John Smart for input into this article.

Government subsidies disguise true costs of human health services

“The true cost of human health services is disguised by government subsidies. We are not saying no to subsidised care for humans. But we do say that veterinary healthcare costs have similar cost drivers to human health. Similar pricing should therefore be understood and accepted by both production and companion animal owners,” says Julie Hood, the CEO of NZVA.

“Take for example a cat spay. Many owners believe the cost of this surgery is expensive at between \$100-200. But when you consider that this surgery is the same as removing a uterus, ovaries and fallopian tubes in a woman it is major abdominal surgery. The cost argument becomes ridiculous,” Ms Hood adds.

“I could continue to make other comparisons but in no way do I want to detract from our New Zealand health services. Our job as representatives of our veterinarian members is to help animal owners understand and appreciate the incredible value for money they deliver.

“It is necessary for veterinarians to have a wide range of expensive diagnostic and surgical equipment, particularly where practices are outside the main centres,” Ms Hood says.

Pet owners ought to take these very real and also reasonable costs into account when they adopt a kitten or a puppy into the household. Veterinary care is essential to ensure optimum care of our patients, your companion animals, and there is a cost associated with this.

Ms Hood suggested that as with human health, pet owners do have the option of pet insurance.

Vets@Work

Vets@Work is a regular ezine to keep you up to date with current and topical veterinary issues from the NZVA.

If you would like to subscribe or no longer wish to subscribe to Vets@Work please [click here](#).

Vets@Work is published by the New Zealand Veterinary Association
Level 2 | 44 Victoria Street | PO Box 11 212 Wellington
T 04 471 0484 | F 04 471 0494 | E nzva@vets.org.nz | W www.vetspace.org.nz
For more information contact Julie Hood, CEO, New Zealand Veterinary Association
[Click here to unsubscribe](#)