

PROCEEDINGS



SYMPOSIUM

Living in a Healthy Community



Deakin University Melbourne,
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People, Pets and Planning Symposium Speakers

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Living in a Healthy Community

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Introduction

In the fast pace of modern life, humans are experiencing health challenges at an unprecedented rate. Disease as a consequence of lifestyle is now common and is predicted to steadily rise. Obesity, mental illness and physical inactivity are all creating an increasing burden on our economy. Turning this trend around will require new thinking.

Research in public health has shown that restoring our connections with each other and with our environment will have benefits for individual health and for the community as a whole.

We now know that some of the simplest pleasures in our lives are among the most important to our health and wellbeing. Walking in our neighbourhood, interacting with people and animals, enjoying the natural environment have all been shown to play a significant role in supporting physical and mental health.

The simple act of regularly taking a dog for a walk to a local park brings with it opportunities for reconnecting, strengthening communities and increasing trust. The physical aspects help to sustain wellbeing through managing body weight and cardiovascular health.

Pets have been shown to provide considerable health benefits through alleviation of stress, constant companionship, and encouraging play in children. Katcher and Beck wrote in 1996 that pets offer protection against stress and change by their constant nature and the positive feelings and actions they evoke in people. Our access to these simple pursuits can be eroded or enhanced, depending on the regulatory, physical or social environment we find ourselves in.

Finding ways to improve wellbeing through increasing levels of social capital and physical health is a long term goal for public health promotion. The stakes are high: lower levels of social trust have been associated with higher rates of most causes of death, including heart attacks, cancer, stroke, unintentional injury and infant mortality (Kawachi and Berkman 2001).

It may be possible that one way to improve wellbeing has been overlooked. Pets factor highly in the Australian way of life – two thirds of Australian households have some kind of pet – one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world. The links between pets and individual health has been well established. This Symposium will present new research about the links between pets and community wellbeing.

The People, Pets and Planning Symposium aims to explore how we might restore community connections, reduce physical inactivity and improve wellbeing through simple means: planning for people, pets, and public open space.

“...in no time during history have humans become so devoid of healthy interaction with each other, and with their environment...”

**“Healthy Parks,
Healthy People”
Parks Victoria,
Deakin University,
2002.**

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Associate Professor Mardie Townsend

Mardie Townsend is an Associate Professor in the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University, where she teaches in the area of 'Public Health' with a particular focus on the links between 'People, Health and Place'.

Mardie was a foundation student in the multidisciplinary Bachelor of Social Science (Socio-Environmental Assessment and Policy) course at RMIT and completed a Ph.D. in environmental sociology in 1996.

Her research interests include: the links between human health and contact with nature/natural environments, social and health impact assessment, social capital and its links to health, ecological and social sustainability, rural health and well being, and housing.

Mardie has considerable experience in both research and consultancy, has supervised numerous Honours students, is currently supervising eight postgraduate students and has a substantial list of publications and conference presentations relating to her research.

With Parks Victoria and other organisations, Mardie is leading research into the health benefits of contact with nature, including: exploring community attitudes to and use of local parks; assessing the benefits of companion animals in hospitals and aged care facilities; and investigating the health and well being outcomes of differing levels of access to nature (for example, through pets, parks and gardens) for high-rise housing residents.

Biophilia and Health:

How our relationship with living things can influence our health

Dr. James Lynch, in his book ‘A Cry Unheard: New Insights into the Medical Consequences of Loneliness’, recounts the story of Margaret, one of his patients who was suffering from cancer, as well as extreme loneliness and depression. Asking Margaret if there were particular times of extreme vulnerability and depression, she replied:

“It’s 11 o’clock at night ... and there is no-one there to hold you – not yesterday, not today, and not tomorrow. ... It’s an unbearable and terrifying feeling. ... Tomorrow, I am getting a puppy, and then I will get a cat and some fish and even some plants. My house has been silent and empty long enough. I need to let life back in.”

What Margaret’s approach reflects is the reality that Edward Wilson identified in the early 1980s as ‘biophilia’ – the innate need human beings have for contact with nature. Yet over the past two centuries, humans have become increasingly separated from nature and natural environments. In the view of Wilson, this separation has contributed substantially to the ills which plague modern societies. Research supports the biophilia hypothesis, indicating that contact with nature through pets, parks, plants and the like has positive health benefits through reducing stress, enhancing recovery, improving mood, increasing social connections, and so on.

This Symposium – People, Pets and Planning – highlights ways in which each of us can ‘let life back in’ for ourselves and for others, and through that enhance individual and community health and wellbeing.

Paper by

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Professor Billie Giles-Corti

Billie Giles-Corti is a Professor in the School of Population Health, The University of Western Australia. For more than a decade, she and a multi-disciplinary research team at UWA have been studying the impact of the built environment on health behaviours.

A leading health promotion researcher in Australia and recognized internationally for her research on the built environment and health, Professor Giles-Corti serves on numerous national and state committees.

With her team of research students, she is currently studying how urban design influences neighbourhood walk ability, transport and recreational walking and cycling, mental health, obesity, perceived and actual safety, transport sustainability and the ability of dog owners to walk with their dog.

She is to be the Director of the soon to be established, Centre for the Built Environment and Health at UWA.

Improving Health and Health Behaviours through Urban Design

There is growing evidence to support the notion that urban design and regional planning affects the physical and mental health of residents. Physical inactivity, obesity, hypertension, and factors protective of mental ill health (e.g., sense of community) have all been linked to various aspects of the built form. Many major chronic diseases of the 21st century are associated with physical inactivity which is now second only to tobacco as the leading cause of death and disability in Australia.

Increasing recreational and transport-related walking have been identified ways to increase and maintain community physical activity levels. However, the challenge ahead is enormous. Currently, few adults or children use active modes even for short trips. In children in recent decades, increasing levels of traffic combined with parental concerns about personal and traffic safety have contributed to a rapid decline in walking or cycling to school and the development of a so-called 'bubble wrap' generation – children who are always accompanied by an adult. Accompanying children on trips outside the home has become synonymous with 'good' parenting further limiting children's independent mobility. In adults, a number of studies now indicate that there are lower levels of walking in neighbourhoods characterised by low density, poorly connected street networks, and poor access to shops and services.

Factors that contribute to recreational walking, and all the associated benefits related to building sense of community and social capital and improving mental health, are less well articulated, although there is evidence that perceptions of the aesthetics of the neighbourhood environment is to be important. Access to local green space also helps to create more restorative neighbourhoods that have the potential to reduce mental fatigue and stress, while fostering a sense of community. Although a new field of research, designing convivial neighbourhood with enhanced surveillance may not only encourage more walking, but also increase sense of

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safety (more eyes on the street) as well as facilitating interactions between neighbours thereby increasing sense of community. In turn, this may influence positive mental and physical health in local residents. There is evidence to suggest that more walkable neighbourhoods are associated with higher levels of social capital: the social fabric that holds communities together.

Until recently, one important sub-population that has been largely ignored in terms of the design of neighbourhood, are the needs of dog owners who wish to walk their dogs. In Australia, some 40% of households are home to a dog. With an ageing population and an increasing number of people living alone or with one other person, catering for pet ownership in communities is important for mental and social health of local residents. Regular dog walking is not only beneficial to the dog and its owner, but also add value to the community by increasing social capital and helping to build community.

In this paper, I give an overview of the impact of the built form on behaviour and highlight why considering pet owners in the design of new and existing neighbourhoods is so important. Drawing on a program of work being undertaken at The University of Western Australia I give an overview about why considering dog owners is important and how research can be used to inform policy and practice that will ensure that we design neighbourhoods for multiple users, including dog owners.

Dr Lisa Wood

Dr Lisa Wood is a research fellow at the University of Western Australia and a public health consultant with 17 years experience in the arena of health promotion.

She has recently completed a PhD examining the relationship between neighbourhood environments, social capital and health. The role of pets as a facilitator of social capital and sense of community was explored as part of this study and has been subsequently published in two international journals.

Other areas of research and public health activity include mental health promotion, social determinants of health, tobacco, strategic planning, aboriginal health, domestic violence prevention and the translation of research into policy and practice.

Lisa has worked with both government and non-government organizations and consulted within Australia and overseas, and has a strong interest and commitment to research that is useful and relevant to the 'real world'.

Her lifetime 'pet CV' to date includes 'Patches', 'Paddy', 'Benson' and 'Bella' (dogs); 'Fluffy' (a not very fluffy cat); 'Cocky' who flew away, the occasional goldfish and crazy crab!

The Pet Connection: Pets as a conduit for social capital?

Australians share their homes with nearly 30 million dogs, fish, cats and other pets, with nearly two thirds of the population cohabiting with some type of pet. There is growing interest across a range of disciplines in the relationship between pets and health, with a diversity of therapeutic, physiological, psychological and psychosocial benefits now documented.

The majority of studies have focused on the therapeutic or 'one to one' benefits accruing from interactions with pets, but there is growing interest in the social and relational dynamics that may be influenced by the presence of pets in our lives and communities.

This paper considers the potential role of pets as facilitators of social interactions and social capital within suburban neighbourhoods, both among pet owners and the broader community. This is a relatively unexplored research to date, but is of increasing interest to health promotion, local government, urban planners and pet and veterinary groups.

The paper draws from relevant literature, a social capital research study undertaken in Western Australia, and a series of case-studies currently being collected from pet owners.

Pets have been found to act as a lubricant for social contact, favour exchanges and elevated perceptions of suburb friendliness and sense of community.

In the survey undertaken in 2002, pet owners were more likely to have higher social capital than their non-pet owning neighbours. Such social benefits of pets are not merely 'neighbourhood niceties' but can positively influence health at the individual and community level.

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In addition to the health benefits of dog walking, pets appear to counter some of the known determinants of poor mental health, including loneliness, social isolation and lack of social support. Conversely, pets can also contribute to sense of community and feelings of connectedness, both of which are protective factors for good mental health.

So what?

There is growing policy and public interest in social capital and halting the 'erosion' of sense of community in 21st century society. Given the high rates of pet residency within neighbourhoods, there is merit in recognising and mobilising the role that pets can play in facilitating social capital and sense of community. This includes the potential ripple effect on non-pet owners and the broader community and has practical implications for the way in which pets are both accommodated and valued in urban communities.

Hayley Cutt

Hayley received an Australian Research Council, Australian Postgraduate Award - Industry (Petcare Information and Advisory Service) PhD scholarship in April 2004. Her PhD focuses on the relationship between dog ownership and physical activity.

The "DAPA" (Dogs and Physical Activity) Study forms a part of the larger RESIDE Project.

Hayley has worked in the area of health promotion research at The University of Western Australia over the last 10 years.

The Effect of Walking the Dog on Adult Physical Activity Levels: Implications for local and state government

The contribution of physical inactivity to lifestyle-related disease stresses the need to investigate effective strategies that will increase community physical activity levels. An area of research that has received less attention but which has the potential to increase walking in a large proportion of the community is dog walking. Dog ownership produces considerable health benefits and provides an important form of social support that may encourage dog owners to walk.

Almost 40% of all Australian households own a dog, however up to 60% of dog owners don't walk with their dog. Factors identified as barriers to people walking with their dog include poor access to quality off-leash public open space (POS) and inadequate provision of appropriate dog-related infrastructure within POS.

Such physical-environmental barriers relate to issues that can be addressed at the local policy level. The aim of this study was to examine dog owner and non-owner physical activity levels and to investigate the effect of the local policy environment on dog owner's walking with their dog in public.

Methods:

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed. Participants (n=1379) taking part in the RESIDE study completed a self-administered questionnaire on dog ownership, dog walking, physical activity and, social and physical environmental, intrapersonal and socio-demographic factors. Supplementary qualitative data was collected to determine the local policy issues associated with walking with a dog. A total of 17 focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with key employees from local

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governments across metropolitan Perth. Local government employees provided information about positive and negative issues related to residents walking with their dog in public.

Results & Conclusions:

On average, dog owners walked more per week than non-owners (155 vs. 111 mins/week respectively, $p<0.001$) and more dog owners (65%) than non-owners (55%) were sufficiently active to incur health benefits. After controlling for socio-demographic, social-environmental, physical environmental and intrapersonal differences, dog ownership remained a significant independent predictor of physical activity and walking.

On average, dog owners walked with their dog three times per week for a total of 106 minutes. The majority of dog walking was recreational walking within the local neighbourhood and this has a number of implications for local government.

Local government employees identified a number of regulatory issues likely to arise as a result of more people walking their dogs in public. The results of this research confirm the potential role which dogs could play in encouraging owners to be more active and highlight the importance of a supportive local policy environment for encouraging owners to walk with their dog.

Dr Jo Salmon

Dr Jo Salmon is from Deakin University, Melbourne Australia and is supported by a National Heart Foundation of Australia Career Development Award.

She has published more than 50 peer review papers, is Associate Editor of the International Journal for Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity and in 2004 was co-author of the Australian Physical Activity Recommendations for Children and Youth.

Do Families with Pets have more Active Children?

Background

Physical activity (PA) is important for children's mental, social and physical health. Children's PA includes sport, active transport, and active play. With increases in overweight and obesity and declines in some aspects of children's PA, it is important to identify individual, social and environmental factors that are associated with activity levels. Social influences, such as having a dog may be important for children's PA. In 2002, approximately 64% of households in Australia owned a dog. While dog ownership has been found to be associated with adult levels of walking, less is known about associations between dog ownership and children's PA.

Aims

To examine associations of dog ownership and PA among children and their parents, and whether these associations differ according to child's age and sex and the sex of the parents.

Methods

Children (aged 5-6 and 10-12 yrs) and their parents were recruited from 19 randomly selected schools from high and low SES areas in Melbourne. Parents and older children (10-12 yrs) completed a questionnaire on physical activity and dog ownership. Children also wore an accelerometer on their hip for eight consecutive days.

Results

There were 294 children in the younger age group, 926 children in the older age group, 849 mothers and 669 fathers. Approximately 53% of families owned a dog. Among families with a dog, 50% of younger children and 62% of older children walk the dog in a typical week. Children who owned a dog spent significantly more time in moderate- to vigorous-intensity PA (MVPA) compared with those without a dog (252±68 vs 268±60 mins/day for younger children; 131±39 vs. 125±39 mins/day for older children, $p<0.05$). Mothers of younger children who owned a dog also spent more time in MVPA compared to those without a dog (349±248 vs. 275±261 mins/day, $p<0.05$). On average, younger girls with a dog performed 29 mins/day more

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MVPA than those without a dog, and their mothers were 70% more likely to meet PA recommendations if they owned a dog.

Conclusions

Dog ownership may be important for younger girls' and their mothers' PA. Possible reasons for this may include safety and social companionship of the dog in going for walks in the neighbourhood. Mothers might accompany their daughters (or vice versa) to walk the dog so that both benefit. Further research is needed to identify how to encourage all dog owners to walk their dog regularly, for the sake of their own health and that of their canine companion.

Lauren Prosser

Lauren Prosser is a PhD candidate and research fellow within the School of Health & Social Development, Deakin University.

Lauren is a member of NiCHE, Nature in Communities, Health and Environments research group where she has completed numerous research work.

Her PhD research investigated the health and wellbeing impacts of implementing a visiting companion animal intervention into a hospital environment to assess stroke patients whilst they resided in an acute care setting.

Her most recent research interest is in the area of childhood obesity and the influences that the environment has on obesity.

Review of Literature on the Health Benefits of Pets to People

There is a growing body of literature indicating a strong correlation between health, wellbeing and contact with companion animals. Literature indicates that to maintain health a person must have contact with other living things and not solely companions of their own kind (Beck and Katcher 1996). A 'companion animal' is defined as an animal that is frequently in the company of, associates with, or accompanies another or others; one that assists, and lives with another as a helpful friend.

Companion animals have played an important role in human lives for thousands of years. Discoveries have revealed that dogs may have been domesticated by Native American Indians over 30,000 years ago. Overtime humans have formed a strong attachment to companion animals. This paper will explore the diverse health benefits humans obtain from companion animals. The dimensions of health will be explored focusing on: social health, physical health, emotional health, mental health, and psychological health. Each dimension contributes to a holistic construction of health and wellbeing.

The paper will highlight from the literature how contact with pets, visiting companion animal programs and animal assisted therapy can influence healthier communities. Research within Australia and internationally has demonstrated the contribution companion animals make to families and individuals, the workplace, aged care facilities, nursing homes, hospitals and school environments.

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Virginia Jackson

Virginia works with all levels of government to produce better outcomes in animal management.

She has conducted much seminal research in the field including the investigation of new approaches to compliance with animal management laws and pet friendly guidelines for new housing and public open space.

Her specialty area is in the development of animal management plans.

Pets and Planning: How design can influence the health of pet owners and improve compliance

Many people walk their dog regularly- some daily. This is good for dogs, it's good for their owners and it can be good for the community, because dog walking is often prescribed as a cure for a range of animal behaviour woes.

However in Australia it is becoming harder to walk dogs and own pets. Increasing Council restrictions, the master planning of public open space and the prevailing paradigm of urban development mean that many new suburbs are unsuitable for owning pets.

Virginia works with local authorities around Australia to improve the integration of pets into the community. She firmly believes that we need to start planning for pets and their owners (in the same way we now plan for a range of community needs). The risk if we don't is that pet ownership will increasingly become a marginalised activity enjoyed by the lucky or committed few.

In this presentation, Virginia will describe the pet friendly suburb and what this means for urban development.

**Paper by
Virginia Jackson,
Harlock Jackson Pty Ltd**

Eltham Recreational Walkers Group

The Eltham Recreational Walkers Group Inc. (ERWG) represents the wide spectrum of people who walk in Eltham Lower Park. It includes families, mothers with strollers and toddlers, many mature aged people for whom walking is their principle form of exercise, as well as those with physical impairments.

However, the largest group is walkers with dogs. These walkers feel safe to walk in this bushy parkland while enjoying the company of their canine friends. With, and often through these companions, strong social bonds are formed with both two-legged and four-legged walkers.

Fay Gravenall is the President of the Eltham Recreational Walkers Group and walks regularly in the park with Charmi the Rottweiler and Phoebe the Poodle.

Unleashing Healthy Lifestyles: People and pets in the local park

The Eltham Recreational Walkers Group (ERWG) emerged in response to the need to promote the importance of recreational walking, particularly for those concerned with responsible pet ownership. Eltham Lower Park (LEP) accommodates many recreational interests, most of them easily identified by uniforms, discrete hours of gathering and needing high level provision/servicing of grounds and buildings (cricket, lacrosse, bike riding, horse riding, miniature train circuit). In the midst of all this organized activity, walkers remain the largest stakeholder group, many using the park for walking recreation every day.

A day in the park reveals that there are predictable 'shifts' of walkers.

In the early morning the pre-work walkers are out, walking alone and together in small groups with their dogs also socializing in groups.

By mid morning the traffic has changed. Young mothers jog with three wheeler strollers containing sleeping babes. These are often accompanied by the family Labrador. They, and their partners feel an extra security as they are watched over by their protectors.

By mid-afternoon, small groups are meeting for arranged walks together. Dogs greet both familiar human and canine friends and set out to walk and idle under the shade of trees while their owners talk politics, recipes and global warming as they walk.

By five pm the 'dog circus' has arrived along with its gaggle of owners. There is walking the trails, swimming in the river and playing ball games on the ovals, more discussions and shared confidences until it is time for home. In the recent hot weather some have delayed walking until evening cool has arrived.

All of this exercise reaps physical benefits for both the dogs and their keepers. Your dog is your perfect fitness partner. Social benefits accrue as well. Dog owners are more likely to speak to others, and be spoken to than otherwise. The

**Paper by
Fay Gravenall,
President of the Eltham
Recreational Walkers
Group**

regular contact between individuals provides mental stimulus, a vehicle for sharing community interests and support for those facing the grittiness of their everyday lives.

But, in addition to these healthy lifestyle factors, the benefits extend into the wider community.

Group members have taken an interest in policy planning, particularly relating to access for walkers with dogs to public open space. The current development of a Master Plan for LEP involves community consultation. ERWG and its individual members are active in this process seeking to preserve and improve this park for walkers with dogs as well as other users. These experiences foster skills needed for citizens to take part in constructing the wider community environment. Walkers with dogs are educating themselves in the participatory processes.

As we enjoy the physical and social benefits that a lifestyle including walking with dogs brings, we look to planners and the community to recognize the significant contributions made to individual and community health by walking recreation and the important role of the dog in this. We believe it is not beyond the wit and imagination of planners to design public open space that accommodates the needs of all recreational users, including walkers with dogs.

Dr Kersti Seksel

Kersti graduated in Veterinary Science from Sydney University and became very interested in animal behaviour while working overseas. To further her knowledge she went back to university graduating from Macquarie University with a BA in Behavioural Sciences with a major in psychology.

In 1992 she began developing the program of Puppy Preschools® in veterinary hospitals around Australia. This interest led her to complete an MA (Hons) degree by thesis on the long and short term behavioural effects of puppy socialisation and training programs.

She is a registered veterinary specialist in Animal Behaviour, a Fellow of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in Animal Behaviour and a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.

Kersti is the principal of a specialist referral only practice for Animal Behaviour in Sydney and sees clients all around Australia. Currently she is the immediate past President of the Australian Veterinary Association, President of the Australian Companion Animal Council, chair of the Companion Animal sectoral group of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy, chair of the SPOT (Safe Pets Out There) NSW Government education programme for children and serves on committees of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists as well as the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee of the NSW government.

Kersti has presented at numerous conferences and meetings in Australia, NZ, UK, Europe, USA, China, South Africa and Japan. She has published numerous papers in scientific journals, magazines and periodicals, numerous chapters in text books, written a book "Training Your Cat" and is a regular contributor to print and electronic media.

Currently she is a regular presenter on ABC radio on pet care and behaviour, columnist for Dog's Life Magazine and Your Garden, contributor to several other magazines as well as a consultant on VIN (Veterinary Information Network) in the USA.

Can Pets Benefit from Better Planning too?

Pets are an integral part of our society. They provide us with pleasure (and sometimes pain); they are considered by many as part of our family and our community. Therefore it is vitally important we look after them as we do other members of our community.

However, as a community we sometimes forget that our pets too have specific needs. They need to have their physical, psychological, as well environmental needs to be met in order for them to be welcome members of our community.

Dogs and cats are social species, just like people. They need contact with others, be it members of their own species or that of other species like people. They need to be socialised, exercised (physically as well as mentally) and their behaviour understood.

We are responsible for meeting the needs of our pets. If we do not do so then problems may arise and our pets may become outcasts in our society through no fault of their own. By understanding their behaviour and planning better for their needs in the community we can help us all live in harmony together so we derive benefit from each other.

**Paper by
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Associate Professor Bruce Headey

Associate Professor Bruce Headey is a Principal Fellow of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

Formerly the Director of the Centre for Public Policy, he is a specialist in welfare and distributional issues and at the forefront of current international research into the efficacy of social welfare policies in Western Europe and North America.

He has published extensively in Australia on this and related issues concerning life satisfaction, subjective well-being and income inequality.

He co-led a major research project on political agenda-setting in Victoria, and has carried out a number of inquiries for the Australian and Victorian Governments on housing and human services.

His specialist area of research involves the use of panel surveys (i.e. surveys which involve successive interviews over a period of years with the same respondents) to investigate social and economic change.

Pets and Human Health: Three decades of research progress

Do pet owners enjoy better health than non-owners? The purpose of this paper is to review three decades of progress in research on this issue.

Early research, mainly in institutional settings (e.g. nursing homes), reported *associations* between the ownership or presence of pet dogs and cats and better human health and well-being, but there was no clear evidence that the relationship was *causal*.

In the 1980s and 1990s several studies moved towards establishing causation by showing (a) that acquiring a pet is associated with *subsequent gains* in health (b) *social mechanisms* – pets contribute to social bonding and bridging networks, and (c) *biological/biochemical mechanisms*, including stress reduction by which pets improve health.

More recently, a ‘natural experiment’ in China, where pets were officially banned until 1992, has shown that the health benefits conferred on owners may be much larger than previously believed.

The paper concludes with suggestions for future research, including research which estimates the economic benefits and health cost savings due to dog and cat ownership.

Paper by
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Notes

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