

## SUBMISSION BY DR JANETTE YOUNG TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION

### ACADEMIC RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The Australian rate of pet ownership is 64% of households, however, this reduces to 48% for people aged over 65 (1). While some of this is due to lifestyle choices (2), many older people choose not to have pets because they recognise that pets are commonly not accepted in aged accommodation. Some of the reasons for pets being precluded in aged care may not seem unreasonable (eg if people are in need of care themselves their ability to care for another being is reduced) however the new Aged Care and Quality Standards enshrine the right for older people to live a life of their choosing (Standard 1), and services to support them to do the things that they wish to do (Standard 4).

While policy models and advice on how to include pets in aged care have been developed the reality is that pet-friendly aged accommodation, particularly when higher levels of care are needed continues to be limited. Limitations include the time-poverty of staff and the reality that staff are employed and trained to care for people not animals – creating a counter concern on the part of animal advocates. There are some services that provide companion animal contact in aged care services (visiting dogs, resident pets, chooks and other resident animals) and these human-animal engagements are beneficial to some residents. However, they miss a crucial facet - that is the individual unique relationship that many people feel with a pet. Another creature who knows them, loves them and accepts them unequivocally. My own research has revealed that for some older people pets have even protected them from taking their own life (3).

We know that human-animal relationships may be of particular benefit when humans experiences are particularly negative. For example when living with chronic mental (4) or physical disability (5). Ageing can be a time of great stress and loss, and it needs to be noted that these vulnerable groups of people age and are part of the aged population. Where people feel ostracised or excluded or somehow distanced from human engagements the qualitative differences that non-human relationships offer seems to be uniquely therapeutic for some people.

More generally relationships between pets, health and ageing identify a range of positive impacts. Improved wellbeing, mood and relaxation capacity; social benefits including the sense of giving and receiving love, companionship, purposefulness, increased social interaction; and perception of being social/approachable(6). Pet owners also seem less likely to decline psychologically and more able to overcome hurdles(7); they may also report an increased sense of safety, physical activity and independence. Negative aspects that have been reported include the grief experienced at pet deaths, responsibilities and worries of having a pet; increased risk of falls and decreased self-care(6).

Awareness of how loneliness can not only reduce quality but also length of life has recently burgeoned. Increasingly the evidence is that loneliness reduces life expectancy (8). Concerningly, other evidence indicates that attempts to create social support networks do not have the same level of positive impact as those that are naturally occurring (9), with pets being such a relationship. So there is a need to identify and support naturally occurring relationships (human and other) in order to best prevent and ameliorate loneliness.

### WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

There is a need for research and implementation of actions that incorporate pets into the frame of older peoples lives.

More applied research is needed on how to incorporate pets into aged care service systems including:

- action research eg systemic projects that map and respond to the interests of multiple players in implementing better models of pet ownership in aged care settings (human - older people, staff, family, visitors; animal lovers and non-lovers; and animals themselves).
- Creative and innovative models are needed eg I am currently working with an aged care service and an animal welfare entity on a model of pet cat fostering in aged care. In this scenario older peoples engagement is highly significant as the euthanasia rates of cats still sits at around 50%. Foster care has reduced this from 80%. Multiple care sites across aged care have the potential to reduce this significantly. We need these older people as their care enables animals to live (literally). Animal needs meets human needs for meaningful engagement.
- There is a need for emergency and short term animal care responses for older peoples pets. So that should they need to be admitted to hospital suddenly their pets are cared for - reducing distress in older owners (stress having impacts on biomedical outcomes) And facilitating animal welfare (eg not leaving animals without food, care or inadequate circumstances). Short term emergency responses are occurring in the family violence field and can be looked to for ideas  
<https://safepetssafefamilies.org.au/>.
- Economic analyses - there are potential savings from recognising and enabling human-pet relationships in aged care settings: possibly from reductions in use of pharmaceuticals, and staff time spent in behaviour management - in turn these savings could be used to fund animal carers and care. This work is yet to be undertaken but should be.
- Aged care funding models need to overtly include/require the potential for care funding to include animal carers to facilitate continued and even new human-animal relationships especially for frail and debilitated older people and to ensure that these animals are cared for appropriately.
- negative aspects of pets need to be recognised and managed but should not be allowed to preclude older people who wish to maintain or even initiate new pet relationships from doing so.

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