

Oakland Tribune, The (CA){PUBLICATION2}

April 2, 2006

Section: Tri-Valley

Article ID: 3665439

Animal-human bond works wonders in both directions

THERE is a lot of talk about the human-animal bond. But until you see it or experience it up close, it's mainly just talk. Last fall, most of us saw images of the little boy in New Orleans who, having spent several days after Hurricane Katrina in the Superdome with his dog, Snowball, was finally evacuated by bus to safer confines. Except his little dog wasn't allowed to go with him. It was heart-wrenching to watch the video over and over of this little boy crying as his dog was taken from him while he was put on the bus.

After the bus door closed we saw the small dog pawing at the closed door, and the little boy crying so hard he vomited, still calling for his Snowball. The human-animal bond, up close and personal, even if only on TV.

In the Tri-Valley we have our own stories. This one is about Minnie and Jeanne. Minnie is a 7-year-old Dalmatian who has been visiting our practice for three years, always with her "Mom," Jeanne, at her side.

Minnie comes to see us for routine doggy care but depends on Jeanne more than many dogs depend on their owners: Minnie has epilepsy and Jeanne has always been there to give her the daily medication that reduces the frequency and severity of her seizures.

In late October of 2005, that dependence reached a high point that continues to this day.

As Halloween approached, Minnie began losing her appetite and then vomited one day. The vomiting continued and then Minnie appeared to become painful in her abdomen.

When X-rays first showed Minnie had swallowed some small rocks that were in her stomach, which would pass on their own, we were relieved and almost amused. Another dog finding ways to amuse herself by investigating the world by mouth, was the reaction most of us had.

But something else was wrong. Instead of getting better, Minnie became sicker. Her skin and the white part of her eyes were beginning to turn yellow.

She was becoming jaundiced, and through blood tests and a liver biopsy we discovered that Minnie's liver was failing for reasons unrelated to the small stones she had swallowed.

The blood test measuring jaundice was worse than we'd ever seen in a dog like Minnie, and the liver biopsy confirmed she had severe Hepatitis, or inflammation of the liver.

In extreme cases like this, the outlook for recovery is poor, and the road back to health — when that occurs — is lengthy and costly.

However, Jeanne had known what it meant to be there for Minnie with her epilepsy medication every day of her life, and the next few weeks were no different. Jeanne wanted to do whatever was necessary to keep her loving companion by her side.

For the next 10 days Minnie was hospitalized in one of our ICU's and received 24-hour care. Starting each morning she began a daily regimen of taking enough medications and nutritional supplements to fill a cereal bowl.

Protein transfusions and intravenous fluids with special additives were given. And heavy doses of TLC.

Jeanne, of course, was a constant source of support for Minnie, visiting her every day. She brought special food when needed, sat in the ICU with Minnie giving her love and attention, and never gave up despite the poor initial prognosis.

We believe Jeanne became one of several integral contributing factors to Minnie's recovery. Slowly Minnie's energy level picked up, although her laboratory tests still indicated how severe her problem remained.

Yet because of Jeanne's devotion to Minnie and her unwavering support of her aggressive treatment, Minnie made significant improvement over time. Her vomiting stopped, her appetite returned and her blood values returned to normal, even though her tissues will remain a mild shade of yellow due to her initial high blood values.

Although the health benefits to humans from having contact with animals is well-documented, we are only beginning to understand the reciprocal effect we humans have on animals.

Recent research indicates that concentrations of various hormones and neurotransmitters, such as beta-endorphin, oxytocin, prolactin, beta-phenylethylamine, and dopamine increased in both humans and dogs after positive interspecies interaction.

Of course, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize what a wagging tail or purr tells us about how we affect our pets in a purely psychological manner. But with other documentation showing that neurotransmitters in the brain can affect our white blood cells and other body tissues, is it any wonder that a positive mental experience — on either end of the human-animal bond — should have healing effects in the rest of the body?

We were all ecstatic to see Minnie leave the hospital. It is success stories like these that keep all of us in the veterinary profession in love with what we do.

And not just because of Minnie. At our practice, everyone felt they'd met a new friend — and an honorary staff member — in Jeanne. Since her discharge from the hospital a few months ago Minnie has done very well. Her seizures are controlled and her liver is working just fine.

Unfortunately in the last month the tables have turned, and now Jeanne is not feeling well. Now Minnie is there for Jeanne, providing unconditional love and support.

We are all pulling for Jeanne, and now it's Minnie's turn to take care of her companion — a role that Minnie seems to fill naturally. It was an honor to help Minnie and Jeanne when Minnie was ill, and we are very glad that Minnie can be there for Jeanne now.

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