

## Health and the human/animal relationship\*

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Animals have been important to psychiatric patients for a long time, at least back to the Retreat at York and later in the farms which became a feature of Victorian asylums.

Although hospital farms eventually fell into disfavour officially, many patients missed the contact with animals and the opportunity to provide as well as receive care.

The serendipitous rediscovery of the benefit of animals in the 1950s involved domestic pets in psychotherapy, especially with withdrawn children. This led again to their use to enhance the environment of psychiatric hospitals and other institutions. The emotional bond between people and animals is now more consciously targeted.

There have since been many practical ventures in making animal companionship available to disabled people of all kinds and many studies of human/animal interactions.

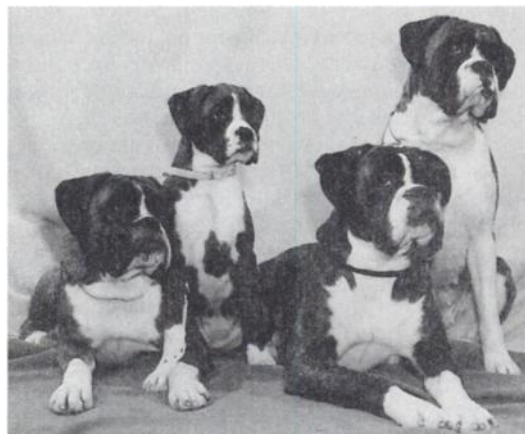
Current developments were reviewed recently at a meeting of SCAS, the main British organisation, which has produced a set of guidelines for the introduction of pets into institutions. Presentations centred on animals in psychiatric hospitals, hospices, residential homes for the elderly, and community housing projects, and their paradoxically humanising effect emerged clearly. As either resident pets or visitors, animals stimulate the flow of conversation and open expression.

The conference participants included a group of amiable Boxer dogs who have visited the wards at Goodmayes Hospital regularly for the past three years. The pleasure they have brought to long-stay patients is difficult to quantify but unarguable to anyone who has witnessed it.

Veterinary surgeons frequently find themselves acting as bereavement counsellors for pet owners, whose grief often has to be hidden lest it be regarded

as inappropriate, or trivialised. Although only 4% had received any relevant training, they appear to bring considerable common sense and a great deal of compassion to the task. Indeed one of the speakers – a psychiatrist – remarked that he had found compassion and empathy more evident in discussions with veterinary surgeons than with his usual audiences. However, a considerable proportion themselves suffer grief reactions to their patients' deaths by illness or euthanasia, including weeping, guilt, anger and insomnia – and they have to perform euthanasia on average once or twice a week. Women, who form an increasing proportion of the profession, suffer particularly. This possible cause of depression would seem to call for exploration on both practical and theoretical grounds.

Psychiatrists and vets would benefit from getting together more, and SCAS is a useful forum. The Pat Dogs (now Pets as Therapy) Organisation will make small animals available to visit hospitals and other groups.



*The Boxer dogs who visit Goodmayes Hospital.*

\*Conference held by the Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) on 25 June 1990 in the Robin Brooke Centre, St Bartholomew's Hospital, London.