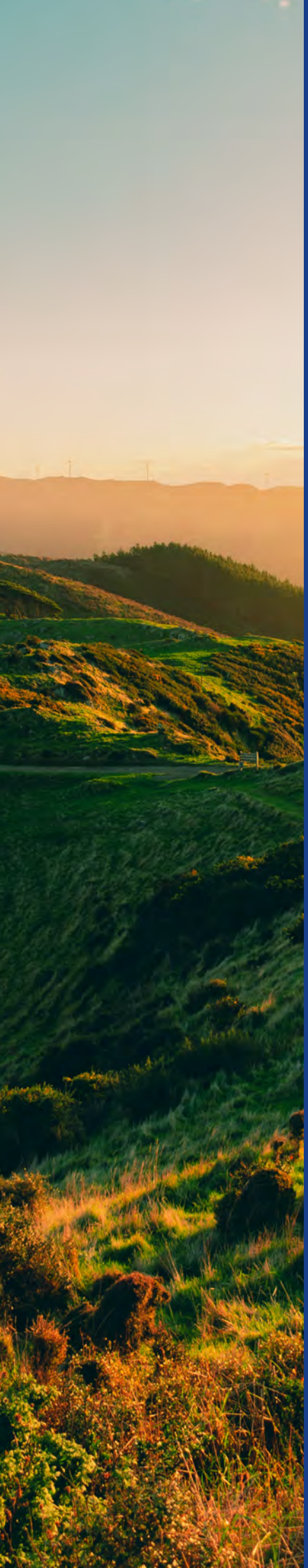
COMPANION ANIMALS NEW ZEALAND

TOWARDS A GOOD LIFE
VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
2021

Companion Animals NZ

ISBN 978-0-473-60438-7

OCT 28 & 29, 2021



COMPANION ANIMALS NEW ZEALAND 2021 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
OCTOBER 28 & 29

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A GOOD LIFE FOR COMPANION ANIMALS

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Alongside developments in the way in which scientists assess animal welfare, there has been increasing societal concern about ensuring animals live 'a good quality of life'. Quality of life is a human concept that has been applied to animals particularly in the veterinary field where owners are being helped to make end of life decisions about their pets. Increasingly researchers and veterinarians are focussing on addressing quality rather than quantity of life, and developing methods and scoring systems for being able to understand whether an animal has a life worth living, or even better - a good life.

Being able to determine what constitutes a good life for our companion animal species is challenging due to the subjective nature of an animal's emotional state as well as our lack of knowledge with respect to the things that are important to them. Yet the opportunity to enjoy a good quality of life, is important for animals for a whole range of reasons, not just for owners when making difficult decisions such as the right time to end their pet's life due to terminal illness, but also in relation to the way an animal is housed, managed and handled for companionship, recreation and sport.

The problem is that 'measuring feelings' – or gaining an insight into the private mental world of an animal is extremely challenging. Humans can self- report. We can ask them how they feel, rate the strength of their feelings and relate their behavioural responses and choice to what they say. But animals don't communicate verbally, and often their behavioural responses go unnoticed or are misunderstood. In addition, we are better at measuring the presence or reduction of negative affective states, such as stress or pain, than positive ones. We need to be clear that the absence of negative affective states, doesn't necessarily mean the presence of a positive mental state, and judging whether an animal is enjoying a Good Quality of Life, requires knowledge and measurement of both. In this introductory talk I will introduce some of the challenges as well as the recent advances involved in assessing affective states and QoL for ensuring a Good Life for our animals – and set the scene for the wonderful presentations to follow.

A GOOD LIFE IN THE SHELTER

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What does A Good Life look like for animals in the shelter environment, what are the barriers and how can it be achieved?

A Good Life for a potential shelter animal is a life where the animal does not enter the shelter. Even the best designed shelter is an inherently stressful environment for the animal. Changing the model of animal sheltering from a rescue and rehome model, to a community support model focused on keeping people and animals together, is a fundamental shift in how shelters deliver services. Helping animals to stay in communities (when it is in the animal's best interests to remain in his or her home) allows shelters to focus on animals most in need, frees up resources for use in preventative services (such as desexing and microchipping community drives), and fosters the human/animal bond that provides quality of life benefits to people and animals alike. The first part of this talk will discuss what a community support model of animal sheltering might look like, including the support services that could be developed, engaged and strengthened, and how these will act to create more effective long-term human behaviour change.

The second part of this talk will focus on providing A Good Life for animals who do enter the shelter. Experiencing A Good Life in the shelter environment is underpinned by two main principles; stress reduction and reduction in Length of Stay. Stress is the single greatest risk factor for illness and behavioural problems in the shelter environment, which in turn acts to increase the animal's length of stay and reduces adoption success. All elements of the shelter environment and experience, from point of intake through to outcome, can be designed to minimise stress. Using cats, whose physical and mental needs have been overlooked for decades in the shelter environment, as a primary example, discussion will focus on shelter housing design and flow, proactive capacity management (including fostering), low-stress husbandry principles, and human-animal interaction principles that act to reduce stress and keep their stay in the shelter to a minimum.

USING SCIENCE TO MOVE BREEDS TOWARDS A GOOD LIFE

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Concern for an animal's welfare commonly begins at birth (or soon before), with the lived experience of sentient beings the central focus for those seeking to improve animal welfare and achieve 'A Good Life' for animals. However, events that precede birth, and indeed human decision-making that precedes conception, are key to an animal's future welfare, and their ability to achieve 'A Good Life'. When considering an 'input' based approach to animal welfare assessment (i.e. focusing on what we provide an animal with, such as appropriate housing and feeding etc.), genetic health is a core but sometimes underappreciated input that can positively or negatively affect an animal's welfare, for potentially their entire life. Selective breeding of companion animals is a powerful tool that can do great good, for example, selecting away from known inherited disorders, and selecting for good temperament compatible with their ultimate role. However, selective breeding also has the power to cause great harms to animal welfare, particularly when anthropocentrically driven, for example, selecting for aesthetic traits that are appealing to humans, but may be directly damaging to animal health.

The impact of breeding on companion animal welfare has received unprecedented attention over the past decade internationally, following a number of high-profile events that questioned practices that have led to, and perpetuated the several hundred breeds of companion animal bred globally, particularly domestic dogs. Scientific interest has correspondingly piqued, with more than ever known about the impact of selective breeding of companion animals. Unfortunately, much of this research has painted a grim picture of the impact of humans 'playing god' with their selection decisions. A systematic review of pedigree dog health revealed almost 400 inherited disorders in domestic dogs, of which almost one fifth were directly related to the body shape they have been selectively bred for by humans. This burden of genetic ill health is sadly often compounded by high demand for pedigree and 'designer' dogs resulting in compromised breeding practices from unscrupulous breeders looking to 'cash in' on this burgeoning market, without regard for canine welfare. The selection decisions of such breeders (or indeed, lack of, beyond mating dogs of the desired 'type'), in combination with poor early life environment and experiences, may set these young animals up for future behavioural and health problems: further hurdles to achieving 'A Good Life'. So, what can be done to improve the chances of A Good Life for dogs by improving their breeding?

Research on genetic health in dogs has provided welfare-conscious dog breeders with a plethora of tools at their disposal to improve the chances of litters they breed experiencing good health and welfare. Recent advances in canine molecular genetics has provided the groundwork for developing genetic tests for many canine inherited diseases, with DNA tests safe and easy to perform, and only required once in a dog's lifetime e.g. Lafora's disease, a severe form of epilepsy in the Dachshund. However, many important inherited diseases in dogs have complex multifactorial inheritance, with more than one gene involved in their development, often alongside environmental factors e.g. hip dysplasia. As such, further testing of prospective breeding dogs may be needed at the phenotypic level before breeding decisions e.g. x-ray screening for hip and elbow dysplasia.

But what about those disorders related to a dog's body shape? Research quantitatively linking conformation and disease risk is sparse but has been conducted for some key conformation-related disorders including Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS) in flat-faced breeds. Given that selection for extreme body shapes is driven by human desires for canine aesthetics, research findings that advocate for breeding towards more moderate body shapes have been largely rejected by the dog breeding community. Research into breeder and owner behaviour of brachycephalic breeds has given clues as to why these key stakeholders show such reluctance to change breeding practices, including normalisation and even desirability of the clinical signs of disease, such as snoring and exercise intolerance. Despite these challenges, the results of conformation research in dogs have been included in international animal breeding laws to set 'healthy conformational limits', demonstrating that legislative approaches may sometimes be needed to tackle the most intractable health problems in dogs. Within such legislation, it is essential that offspring are explicitly protected, as has recently been introduced to UK legislation, but not yet tested in court for conformation-related disease.

Using research to improve breeding has provided many practical tools for international kennel clubs to promote to their registered breeders, but what about those breeders outside of these systems? Large scale commercial breeding (also known as 'puppy mills' or 'puppy farms') as well as 'backyard' or 'hobby' breeders often raise welfare concerns for breeding dog and puppy welfare. Breeder licensing offers a way to try and limit some of the most damaging dog breeding and rearing practices, including both pedigree and crossbred animals within their remit. Breeder licensing has been implemented in several countries including the UK, where all breeders who breed 'commercially' (in the UK's case, sell puppies intended to make a profit, or sell three or more litters per year) must be licensed. Breeder licensing allows for inspection of breeders' premises to assess against basic standards for dogs, including suitable accommodation, adequate diet, drink and bedding, provision of regular exercise, safe and comfortable transportation, protection against emergencies (e.g. fire), and protected from pain, injury, suffering and disease. Licence numbers being displayed in any advertising of puppies, alongside the name of the licensing local authority and a recognisable photo of the puppy and its age (with a minimum age requirement at sale; in the UK 8 weeks), improves the advertising standards of puppies and prospective owner awareness of regulations. Furthermore, the UK has recently introduced a ban on third party sales of puppies, so that a breeder must now sell directly to new owners, and purchasers must be allowed to see puppies with their mother and littermates (and the father wherever possible). Science-informed regulations form a vital tool in promoting A Good Life for our companion dogs, including breeding animals and their offspring.

THE FIVE DOMAINS MODEL FOR SUPPORTING A GOOD LIFE FOR ANIMALS

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The Five Domains model for welfare assessment is based on the understanding that an animal's welfare state reflects the sum of its various mental experiences at a particular point in time. In accordance with this, it is now commonly acknowledged that 'good' or 'acceptable' welfare cannot be achieved solely by avoiding or mitigating negative experiences but that animals must have some positive experiences too. Recent versions of the model facilitate more holistic understanding of welfare by considering restrictions or conditions likely to lead to negative experiences and opportunities or conditions likely to facilitate positive experiences. Practical applications of the model in various contexts highlight key considerations for assessment of positive experiences and overall welfare.

First, it is important to differentiate between 'opportunities' for positive experiences and 'utilized opportunities' (enhancements) and to provide evidence of the latter wherever possible. Opportunities relate to the resources or environment provided to animals (inputs) which may be present but have no positive effect on welfare. In contrast, utilized opportunities are apparent when observation of animal-based indicators supports the animal's engagement with those resources in ways that suggest it has a positive experience (outputs). To illustrate, provision of an 'enrichment object' for a cat represents an opportunity for positive experience but only engaged interaction with the object indicates that such an experience has occurred. It follows that scientifically validated and practically measurable animal-based indicators of positive experiences are needed – these are currently lacking for many species.

Third, variability among individuals in terms of which opportunities are rewarding makes supporting positive experiences within groups more challenging. Finally, the ways in which negative and positive experiences can be integrated to represent the animal's overall welfare state over time is challenging. The Australasian Zoo Association's application of the Five Domains in its member accreditation framework provides one way to do this. Despite these challenges, use of the model can contribute critical science-based information to broader ethical debates about how much positive experience is sufficient for a 'good life' and how facilitating positive experiences for animals can be legally mandated.

A GOOD LIFE FOR ALL HORSES

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What is a good life for all horses? Ask any horse person and you will likely find a different answer to this question. Horses serve so many different roles, from treasured companion, beast of burden, worker, elite athelete, therapist and, sometimes, food source. Our attitudes to horse welfare are strongly influenced by these roles and and the extraordinary history and tradition of the horse-human bond. But to attempt to understand what might constitute a good life for a horse, our starting point must be the experience of the individual animal. How do do this, when the range of these experiences are so broad, can change so much over the course of a horse's life, and are influenced by so many different factors, is a challenging question.

In this presentation, we will travel along the lifetime of a horse from birth to death and, through the lens of the Five Domains, consider how the decisions and interventions we make on behalf of horses affect their welfare and the capacity for them to experience 'a good life'. We will detour along the way to examine recent developments in Australia and internationally that affect the treatment of horses, using examples drawn from the Thoroughbred racing and breeding industries, the management of wild horses, end-of-life pathways, and the development and application of tools and frameworks to assist in the assessment of horse welfare over time.

After dogs and cats, horses are the most common subject of complaints about cruelty or neglect of animals. However, prosecutions are rare and sometimes contentious. A lack of mandatory minimum standards for horses in Australia means that enforcement actions rely on general cruelty clauses in animal welfare legislation, rather than horse-specific provisions. This means many long-established practices, such as the use of whips in racing, continue to be legally acceptable despite evidence that they harm horses. At the same time, public attitudes towards horse welfare are shifting, with opinion polls indicating that many people now consider using horses for entertainment as cruel and thus would reject the idea that such horses have 'a good life'. Yet within many equestrian and racing communities, the prevailing view is often that their horses enjoy the best welfare of all.

Because of the fractured nature of their circumstances, the need for consistent standards of horse welfare is even more essential than for many other animals that closely interact with people. Anyone can own, breed or ride a horse, and many acquire their knowledge of equine care by replicating traditional practices and long-held beliefs rather than through any formal education. Indeed, compared to centuries of domestication, it is only very recently that the welfare impacts of the way we train, house, ride and care for horses have been subject to scientific scrutiny. As a consequence, even the most informed among us still do not fully understand their complex needs. Being able to track the ownership and experience of a horse over time, via a national horse tracability register, would greatly assist in ensuring the past experiences of an individual horse inform its future care. Strong support for a register in Australia is yet to translate into a concrete proposal, but the potential welfare and biosecurity benefits are clear.

A good life necessarily includes a good death. Ideally, this entails a horse being humanely killed in familiar surroundings by an experienced veterinarian, however, the way in which the lives of many horses end is far from ideal. In 2019, a shocking exposé of the treatment of horses at a Queensland abattoir brought this issue into sharp relief. The focus of that program was the apparent 'wastage' of

once highly valued racehorses. But the conditions associated with the transport and killing of horses at knackeries and abattoirs affect brumbies, paddock ponies and racehorses alike. It is crucial that there exist affordable, practical and reliable solutions for humane killing and disposal of horses when the time eventually comes for their life to end.

The recent inclusion of specific guidance on how to evaluate the negative and/or positive impacts human-animal interactions in the Five-Domains model has particular bearing for horses. In their lifetime, most horses will interact with many different people: different owners, trainers, riders, spectators, veterinarians, farriers and more. Some of these interactions may have a profound and continuing impact on the horses' mental or affective state. Ensuring that the early experiences of horses are positive, where the presence of humans is associated with feelings of safety and enjoyment, can set the foundation for a 'good life'.

Bringing all these elements together in a robust framework of evidence-based standards would create a strong foundation for the future to help ensure a good life for all horses. In the meantime, providing simple, educational Five Domains-based tools that help horse owners better understand the welfare state of their horse is one practical solution to ensure that more horses experience a good life.

A WELL-TRAINED DOG IS A HAPPY DOG

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Companion animals are an important part of our lives and of our shared human-nonhuman animal society. They provide us with an infinite amount of happiness, improve our wellbeing, and health. How can we make sure that we do the same for our nonhuman animal companions? Part of that answer comes from humanely and thoughtfully teaching dogs (and other companion animals) the foundational skills that they need to navigate this human-centric world and the expectations that this carries. These important skills not only allow our companion animals to be able to fully understand what is expected of them, reducing frustration and stress, but it also may allow for more choices, freedoms, and agency in their lives.

The human-dog relationship, as wonderfully rich and complex as it is, is one that is also inherently asymmetrical. They live in human homes and are expected to abide by human rules. In fact, we manage and control companion animals in our society for a variety of reasons (safety, convenience, social expectations, rules, etc.). Therefore, it is increasingly important to provide those individuals with the information they need to make safe, socially appropriate, ideal choices, which can be empowering and enriching for the learner. Choice, as we know, is a primary reinforcer, and choice (including consideration of consent) should be integrated into training and behaviour modification protocols for both a successful outcome and a humane approach.

This presentation will challenge you to consider the importance of teaching social and life skills for success and overall happiness. This includes assessing emotional wellness and positive emotional welfare in our companion animals and improving our relationships with them by improving communication, removing ambiguity and taking a dog-centred approach.

EUTHANASIA: TOWARDS A GOOD DEATH

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Increasingly in animal welfare, we aim to provide a 'good life' for the animals we keep as companions, but even though we have an emotional bond with our companion animals, we may often struggle to provide good welfare for them. Companion animals often lead lives with significant behavioural and physical restrictions – we choose what and when they will eat, who they socialize with, when they exercise, where they sleep, and in many cases even when or where they can toilet. Such decisions are made almost automatically, often unthinkingly, and often on the basis of prior experience, convenience, or informal advice, rather than scientific evidence. Of course, companion animals also benefit from their relationship with us – by restricting their social and physical activities, and providing them with food, and veterinary care, they're less at risk of traumatic injury, infectious disease and other health-related problems. But this level of protection also generates an entirely different set of welfare and ethical challenges, particularly for companion animals bred for extreme conformation or those entering older age and experiencing multiple health problems.

We value our companion animals often not just for themselves but also for what they bring to our lives, for example, as status symbols of a particular breed or as a reflection on the morality of their owner who has 'rescued' them. This mixed value can confound our ability to provide for their welfare needs, as often the welfare needs of our pets may be in conflict with our own perceptions of their welfare, generating cognitive dissonance in many pet owners. An example of this can be seen in the UK's PDSA Pet Animal Welfare (PAW) reports where companion animals are described as under-exercised, under-socialised and obese, but very much loved by their owners.

In particular, the intrinsic value of companion animals to human society, and our individual emotional bond with them, may often confound objective decision-making around end-of-life animal care. Whilst the slaughter of animals for food production, or humane end-points for animals used in research, are often clearly prescribed and regulated, it is rare for such protections to be extended to our companion animals. There is perhaps, an assumption that the animals with whom we share our homes and lives will automatically experience good welfare throughout their lives and their deaths. But is this always the case? As veterinary medicine services develop, and new treatments are offered, the options for extending the lives of our companion animals increases. Similarly, as selection for extreme conformations becomes increasingly popular, the proportion of companion animals requiring lifelong management of multiple health problems is also increasing. Such investment in owner time, finances and emotion can be significant over the animal's lifetime, and this investment undoubtedly can confound objective decision-making around the animal's welfare state with many owners unable to recognize suffering in their own pets. Delayed euthanasia has been recognized as a significant problem in UK companion animals and companion animal owners often experience feeling of guilt and remorse in addition to their grief after euthanasia of a pet.

This presentation will explore some of the ethical and practical considerations when considering the euthanasia of our companion animals – what does euthanasia really mean? How can we manage it well? And what do we need to consider when we as pet owners need to make that decision, or we as veterinarians support pet owners in making decisions around euthanasia? We'll draw on research from around the world to better understand some of the challenges to really achieving euthanasia in our companion animals, and explore challenges and opportunities in providing a good death to the animals that share our lives.

WHAT IS CANZ ACCREDITATION?

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The animal behaviour and training industry is currently unregulated in New Zealand, meaning that anybody can label themselves a professional. These "professionals" use methods that vary widely, with some being aversive, which can cause long-lasting psychological, and sometimes physical, harm to animals. This damage is often unintentional and caused by a lack of knowledge and understanding.

Industry opinion and readiness for a voluntary national accreditation scheme for professionals working in the field of animal training and behaviour was investigated in 2019 with an online survey. Analysis of the 262 responses (from animal trainers, behavioural consultants, dog safety educators, veterinarians and veterinary nurses) demonstrated that the idea of a programme promoting the use of reward-based training techniques was generally supported.

CANZ Accreditation was launched in 2020, offering a means of identifying and promoting those working in the field of animal behaviour and training in ways that advance animal welfare. Accreditation is available to organisations with formal processes to accredit their members for the use of humane, ethical training methods and shows their members have a proven understanding of animal learning theory and its application. Accreditation of an organisation means that eligible members within that organisation automatically qualify for CANZ Accreditation. There are currently CANZ Accreditation standards for animal trainers, animal training instructors and animal behaviour consultants, and at the time of writing, three organisations have been successfully accredited (APDTNZ, IAABC and PPAB). The list of accredited individuals and their contact information can be found on the CANZ Accreditation website.

Companion animals, especially dogs, are excellent at reading and understanding human behaviour; however, we are poor at reading their behaviour. Their welfare can be compromised if they try to communicate that they feel uncomfortable, and we, as laypeople or even those deemed 'experts', miss the behavioural signs. Therefore, both animal guardians and those working in the industry must recognise their limitations and seek advice from or referral to CANZ Accredited behaviour professionals to actively improve animal welfare.

AGE IS NOT A DISEASE

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Many pet guardians perceive that behavioural changes observed in an aging pet is simply a part of the "normal process of getting old". In fact, many of the changes observed are associated with chronic pain, organic and endocrine disease, and cognitive decline. Proactive recognition and early intervention for these harmful pathologies can significantly improve the quality of life of a senior pet as well as help strengthen the human animal bond.

Senior wellness programmes play an important role in helping veterinarians diagnose many of these conditions in a proactive manner. Once identified, being able to effectively communicate the impact that these conditions have on the quality of life of patients, can be life changing for everyone involved in the care of a senior pet.

This presentation will illustrate the value wellness programmes can bring to senior patients, pet guardians and to veterinary teams. I will present some interesting results from a local study where senior wellness testing was implemented which provides strong evidence of this value, and I will highlight how proactive heath care in this group of animals can go a long way to providing senior pets with a good life.

EMOTIONS IN DOGS AND CATS: ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

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Anybody who lives with a dog or cat knows they experience positive emotions. The squinty eyes your cat makes when you rub them under the chin, or the groan of pleasure of your dog when you scratch them just behind the shoulder, tells you they are happy in that moment. As guardians, we have a duty to maximise the welfare of the pets we love and live with. Learning more about positive emotions in animals, and how we can measure them, helps us to provide the best life possible for our pets.

Emotions are complex feelings associated with physical and psychological changes in the body. The late Jaak Pankseep, a neuroscientist who pioneered studies of animal emotions, outlined seven core emotions that animals can experience: seeking, care, play and lust are positive emotions; and fear, sadness and anger negative. Basic emotions are contained in specific brain circuits with similarity to the brain structures of the same emotional circuits in humans. The conservation of emotions across biology demonstrates their survival value. Avoiding negative emotions helps us to avoid predators who will kill us, while positives such as finding food help our survival. Emotions have both valence (positive or negative) and level, or arousal.

Science has made great progress in the last 20 years in understanding emotions in animals. Previously the study of emotions in animals was not 'serious science'. We can measure emotions in animals using both physiological (the functioning of our bodies) and behavioural measures. Gregory Bern in the US pioneered the training of dogs to sit inside an MRI machine. The caudate nucleus in the dog brain lights up when dogs are in a state of positive anticipation, such as showing them an object that signalled they would get food or praise (some dogs preferred praise to food). Other physiological measures, such as heart rate and cortisol (a stress hormone), while useful can change in similar ways in both positive and negative states. Heart rate will increase in an animal that is excited to see their guardian come home, or because they are anxious when they hear a thunderstorm approaching. Physiological changes need looking at in association with other measures, such as behaviour. This is especially important as most pet owners do not have an MRI machine in their lounge room, but can closely observe the behaviour of their pet.

A relaxed body and soft mouth and eyes in dogs and cats signal they are likely to be happy. When we talk about behaviour, it can be the absence of signs of stress that we focus on: lip licking, yawning, rigid stance in dogs and flicking the end of their tail and ears back in cats. Body language varies between individual animals, and with genetic effects on ear and face shape in our pets. A spaniel will struggle to have erect ears, and soft eyes will look different in a pug versus a terrier. Close observation of the body language of our pets provides us with a great deal of information we can pair with what we know about our best friends - we know the positive experiences they seek out, whether its food or toys or company, and can pay attention to their body language at these times. Humans often focus far too much on language and forget the dialogues displayed by the bodies of our pets.

Types of behaviour and behavioural tests are also helpful. Play behaviour is thought to represent a happy animal, although again needs to be looked at in association with other measures. Preference tests can tell us what our animals want, such as their preferred toy or food, and giving them access to these can make them happy. Cognitive bias testing is a type of behavioural test where we can find out

how optimistic or pessimistic animals are. For example, if you always have food in a bowl in the left corner of the room and there is never food in the right corner of the room, once the animal learns what the bowl placement means, you can put a bowl in the middle of the room. An optimistic dog will expect food to be there and run to the bowl more quickly than a dog not expecting food. This tells us something about their emotional state.

An important and overlooked question we need to ask is whether our pets can always be in a positive emotional state. Dogs and cats cannot avoid every negative experience, any more than humans can expect constant happiness. We can argue that we would not experience the highs as much if they did not follow our lows. A Labrador would love to eat all day, but we know short-term pleasure would result in longer-term pain. Many of our pets suffer from anxiety of varying degrees, and many, despite our best efforts, will have acute or chronic diseases. We need to focus more on the balance between positive and negative. In addition, helping our pets deal with negative experiences and increasing their resilience sets them up for future happiness.

Twenty years ago when animal welfare science was still developing there was an emphasis on reducing pain and distress in animals. Harlan and Mercer wrote the song "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive", a hit for Bing Crosby and the Andrews sisters in late 1945. If we can accentuate the positives and not necessarily eliminate the negatives, but at least minimise negatives while enabling our pets to be resilient, then we can improve their welfare. Through better recognition and understanding of the positive emotions our pets display we can strengthen the human-animal bond and wellbeing for all of us.

LET'S TALK ABOUT CATS – WHAT LEADS TO A GOOD LIFE FOR OWNED CATS IN NEW ZEALAND?

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Cat have intrinsic value as a companion animal and are recognised as sentient under the New Zealand Animal Welfare Act 1999. There are approximately 1.2 million owned companion cats in 41% of households across New Zealand. A Good Life for these cats directly relates to Responsible Cat Guardianship. Key components of this include: desexing; microchipping (including registering the microchip on the Companion Animal Register and keeping contact details up to date); vaccinations; flea and worm treatments; regular veterinarian visits; and providing cats with a secure and enriched home.

The desexing rate for owned companion cats in NZ is relatively high (84%) which is down from 93% in 2015. The benefits of desexing cats are well-researched and include: reductions in unwanted cats and kittens, spraying, roaming and fighting; an increase in life span; lowered risk of cancer;. Despite this, the most common reasons for not desexing cats are the cost and a general feeling it is not necessary. In addition, some cats may have a litter before being desexed, which further contributes to the unwanted cat population. The likelihood of undesexed companion cats contributing to the unwanted population of cats is exacerbated by the overwhelming majority of cat guardians allowing their cats to roam freely.

We know that cats can have meaningful lives when they are part of a caring family that provides for their physical, health, and behavioural needs and allows for positive experiences. However, the excessive (planned and indiscriminate) breeding of cats contributes to New Zealand's widespread stray and unwanted cat overpopulation. This has had negative impacts on the cats themselves, other animals, including native wildlife, and people.

To increase the number of responsible cat guardians and improve cat welfare, it is critical to introduce legislation requiring mandatory desexing and microchipping at transfer of ownership or point of sale for all cats, except for registered breeders (pedigree and non-pedigree). This will motivate the responsible supply of cats and kittens through formal channels.

Another key component of providing cats with a Good Life is keeping cats at home (especially in wildlife sensitive areas) which result in multiple benefits for both guardians and cats including including increasing the likelihood of enjoying a longer, healthier life. Other benefits include spending more quality time with you (increasing the guardian-cat bond); keeping them safe from road traffic; avoiding problems with your neighbours; reducing the risk they will harm or kill other animals; becoming lost, stolen, or abused; fighting with other neighbourhood cats; accidental or intentional poisoning or trapping; being attacked by dogs; acquiring infections or disease that can be fatal or have life-long consequences; exposure to parasites, such as worms or fleas and acquiring related illnesses.