

See Spot Heal

Dr. Alan Monavvari, Vice President, Medical Operations at Markham Stouffville Hospital is studying how pets can improve the health of patients.

Simply asking a patient if he or she owns a pet can help physicians improve patient care says Dr. Alan Monavvari, Vice President Medical Operations at Markham Stouffville Hospital. “People like to talk about their pets,” explains Dr. Monavvari. “It strengthens the physician-patient therapeutic alliance and generates a wealth of clinical and psychological data on the patient’s health environment.”

The Benefits of Pets are Plentiful

Pets build social capital, are agents of harm reduction, motivate healthy behaviours and are constructive in treatment plans. Many physicians have prescribed pets instead of anti-depressive medication, with great success.

In hospitals and hospices, therapy animals are used to relieve stress. And in nursing homes, patients with advanced dementia who won’t eat will begin eating if a tank of swimming fish is placed in front of them. Horses and dolphins are also invaluable therapeutic animals for autistic children.

Pet Therapy Study

In 2015, Dr. Monavvari launched a pilot study with veterinarian Dr. Kate Hodgson. The goal was to educate health care professionals on the value of incorporating questions about pets into their examinations. In the first stage of the study, 225 healthcare professionals were surveyed to discover if they routinely asked patients about their pets. Participants in the study then agreed to query patients about the number and species of pets in the home and requested that the patient share their veterinarian’s contact information.

The study changed physicians’ practices in many ways and supplied them with comprehensive information for medical assessment and treatment: 70 per cent reported that patients told them more about themselves, 83 per cent learned more about a patient’s physical activity and 48 per cent developed a better rapport.

The second stage of the study generated materials from the study’s findings for patients to offer their physicians. “The patient’s response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic,” says Dr. Monavvari, who sees no downside for physicians. “Five minutes going through a brochure could change the behaviour of a doctor and improve the outcome for a patient,” he says. “Thirty seconds of questions to a patient is a no brainer to adopt.”

Dr. Monavvari is seeking funding for the third phase of the study, a population-based study focusing on overall well-being and health measured through quality of life scores and chronic disease management.

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