



Contact: Cindy Apgar
678/638-3681
cindy.apgar@merial.com

A PAWSitive Look at *Pets and The Aging,* Science Supports the Human-Animal bond

ATLANTA, December 5, 2003 — A new white paper from PAWSitive InterAction, the public-private community partnership committed to promoting and celebrating the human-animal bond, invites people to "Think PAWSitively" about aging. Titled, *Pets and The Aging, Science Supports the Human-Animal Bond*, the paper highlights medical research that underscores the health benefits of pets as we grow older.

Pets and The Aging captures findings that were presented earlier this year at an educational summit—"Think PAWSitive! 2003"—where medical experts discussed the important role pets play in helping people combat the rigors of aging. Presented by PAWSitive InterAction, a non-profit alliance of Atlanta-based animal-loving organizations, the summit was hosted at Emory University in collaboration with the Emory Center for Health in Aging. The summit brought together medical experts and thought leaders from a variety of disciplines including oncology, gerontology, psychiatry, veterinary medicine and senior living to discuss the positive health impact from pets as we grow older.

"Seniors with pets have 21 percent fewer physician visits, lower blood pressure and better coping skills," said Mayo Clinic cancer specialist Dr. Edward Creagan. As a featured summit speaker, Dr. Creagan cited studies about how pet ownership can help lower blood pressure, decrease loneliness and help increase one's survival rate from a heart attack. "The pet you rescue will really rescue you," said Dr. Creagan, who prescribes "getting a pet" as one of his seven strategies for healthy living.

At the summit, Dr. Rebecca Johnson, associate director for research, Center of Excellence on Aging, University of Missouri-Columbia, presented research that shows so-called "happiness" hormones—such as serotonin—increase after quiet interaction with a dog. Building on this research, Dr. Johnson is exploring the possibility of linking these findings with ways to combat depression using animal-assisted therapy. "Would it be possible to decrease the use of antidepressants by improving the patients' serotonin levels with pets? It's a compelling question."

According to Dr. Sandra Barker, director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University, "These findings are especially relevant to seniors, who are most likely to experience loneliness and depression." Dr. Barker led a summit panel discussion about the importance of pets as social support for the elderly, punctuated by anecdotal stories that brought the research to life.

According to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), a baby boomer turns 50 every 7.5 seconds—and by the year 2050, one in five people worldwide will be over 60. Many will live in an eldercare facility, where, in the past, animals were generally prohibited. Today, some eldercare facilities have made strides in the important decision to allow residents to keep pets. Other facilities arrange for visits by therapy dogs and cats or expose residents to the human-animal bond through wild bird feeders and field trips to zoos or nature centers.

“As people increasingly seek healthy lifestyles and ways to age well, PAWSitive InterAction is dedicated to promoting awareness about the significant role animals can play in our lives at any age,” said Sharon Gruber, President, PAWSitive InterAction. “*Pets and The Aging, Science Supports the Human-Animal Bond* is part of a growing body of scientific evidence confirming what many pet owners instinctively understand—animals can do more than lift your spirit, boost your energy and increase your activity level. They can significantly enhance your physical and mental health.”

Each member organization of PAWSitive InterAction fosters opportunities for people to experience the human-animal bond. Founding members include Zoo Atlanta, Pets Are Loving Support (PALS), Happy Tails Pet Therapy, Atlanta Humane Society, and Merial, makers of FRONTLINE® and HEARTGARD®. For more information, visit www.PAWSitiveInterAction.org.

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