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HEADLINE: Animal Tales: Pets Boost Human Health

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As people look to making New Year's resolutions to attain better health, getting a pet may be one avenue -- animals not only boost emotional well being, but they also play a special role in physical health and in the recovery of illness.

"Sometimes we need science to back up what everybody knew all along -- such as smoking is not good for health -- but animals are very good for people's health, both physically and mentally," Alan Beck, professor at Purdue University, told United Press International's Animal Tales.

"The heart attack study of 1980 was the first objective measure that found the survival rate one year after a heart attack was 94 percent among pet owners but 72 percent for those who did not own pets," said Beck, head of Purdue's Center for the Human-Animal Bond at the School of Veterinary Medicine.

Beck, a pioneer in the study of how the dynamic relationship between people and animals influences the psychological and physiological state of each other, created a series of studies on the health benefits of pets. One landmark study showed a person's blood pressure went down while stroking an animal. In addition, the study found such stroking also reduced anxiety and produced a general feeling of well being.

"Our most recent study found that people with Alzheimer's disease, who often have a hard time focusing and therefore lose interest in eating, had a better appetite when looking at fish in a fish tank while eating," Beck said. "It's a very exciting outcome because the fish help the people be less agitated and as a result they eat more and don't lose weight."

He cited another study in which dental patients who

looked at a fish tank in a waiting room for 20 minutes had less pain during a tooth extraction, "so a person doesn't actually have to look at the fish at the moment to get the benefit."

Dr. Edward Creagan, oncologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., prescribes pets to one-third of his cancer patients to help them cope with the rigors of the disease, according to PAWSitive InterAction, a non-profit group dedicated to celebrating and promoting the human-animal bond.

Beck said people have a natural affinity with nature and respond to sunsets and the seashore -- and animals are just a part of nature that can be brought indoors.

"The beauty of pets is that they don't hold grudges, they provide unconditional love and the interconnection between human and animal is rewarding for both," Beck said. "The research shows

that people find talking to animals less stressful than talking to people and often people will 'try out' a conversation with a pet first before attempting it with a human."

Beck pointed out animals can permit an elderly person to "be alone but not lonely," but often it is difficult for seniors to maintain pets because landlords often prohibit pets, charge a security deposit and require extra rent for pets and exercising a dog can be too strenuous for them.

However, Beck is evaluating the impact of robotic dogs on depression in elderly people as well as on their physical activity and morale. The robotic dog, called AIBO, which means "pal" in Japanese, is about the size of a small lap dog and can bark, play and respond to some commands.

"We are finding that even though the robotic dogs are made of metal and look like something out of TV's 'The Jetsons' people do relate to them," Beck said. "It's not warm and cuddly, but the robotic animal plays the same role as a real animal, however, it's

easier for those that cannot care for a pet by walking and playing with it."

Stephanie LaFarge, senior director of counseling in the animal science department for the American Society for the Prevention of Animals, told UPI's Animal Tales that in the past, pets, particularly dogs and cats, were considered service animals. Dogs often lived outside most of the time and acted as guard dogs and cats spent a lot of time outdoors catching mice.

"Pet ownership continues to grow. It's at 62 percent of American families -- up from 56 percent in 1988 -- and one of the reasons people can have their pets live inside their homes and be closer to them is that pharmaceuticals have made pets free of fleas and other parasites," Cindy Greeno, senior manager of corporate communications of Merial an animal health care company, told UPI's Animal Tales.

The pharmaceutical companies Merck and Aventis SA combined their animal health divisions into a stand alone company, Merial, that provides pharmaceuticals

and vaccines for pets and livestock.

LaFarge said although people always have been close to animals, in the past 50 years the role of animals has changed to the role of companion and now pets are considered members of the family.

"We're now seeing people are hotwired in the brain to respond to animals -- people who stutter are relieved of it while stroking a dog or cat," LaFarge said. "Animals also provide humans with more human contact, walking a dog always breaks the ice with people and we find if someone is disabled and is in a wheelchair if there is a dog more people will relate to the person."

The American Animal Hospital Association conducted a survey of 1,197 pet owners and found 34 percent of pet owners said they talk about their pets to others compared to only 20 percent who said they talked about their spouse.

The same survey found 78 percent of the time it is the family pet that greets a person at the end of the

day -- not the spouse.

"Animals are also good for children to learn responsibility and empathy and they are one of the few areas where male children can learn nurturing skills," LaFarge said.

"But from a mental health point of view almost any stressful or traumatic situation is eased when a pet is around -- a good example is how dogs helped people cope at Ground Zero at the World Trade Center -- people who had survived the horrific Sept. 11 attacks would invariably relax when petting a dog."

LaFarge cautioned that pets are not for everyone. For example, not everyone has the proper circumstances to care for a pet, but just like any good health habit such as healthy eating or exercising, a pet demands time and commitment, but the rewards are great.

"At the very least a dog will encourage exercise because a dog is always up for a walk with its owner, and that's healthy for both owner and dog," she said.