



# The impact of the human/companion animal/veterinarian bond on the future of the veterinary profession

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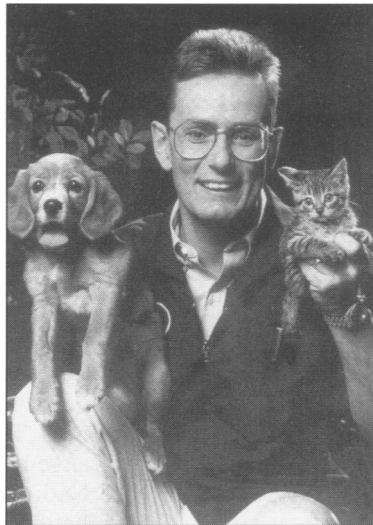
## Introduction

The veterinary profession is at a crossroads. Decisions made within the next few years will ultimately dictate the future of our profession. Whether it will be in crisis or at the dawn of an exciting new era has yet to be determined; the outcome will be determined by the profession's responses to the challenges placed upon it.

The changing demographics of veterinary medicine will undoubtedly affect the profession. For example, Dr. Peg Rucker, 1998–1999 president of the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), is reported as thinking that the growing majority of women entering the profession will result in a profession that will stress compassion and caring more than ever (1). Likewise, the aging population and, in particular, the high percentage of “baby boomers” are likely to result in consumers who will be more sophisticated and discerning, wanting convenience and value, but valuing compassion above all else. To quote Dr. Jim Stowe, “Boomers want the personal touch, and they need to see your passion for and care of their pet before deciding whether to return to your practice” (2). Client loyalties will change and consumers will no longer be satisfied with “average” veterinary care.

The response, according to Dr. Stowe, is to accept change, focus on client needs, emphasize quality, and develop marketing strategies for the so-called boomers (customization, convenience, compassion, and communication) (2). The human/companion animal/veterinarian bond, *The Bond*, addresses these concerns and suggests a strategy for dealing with the challenges facing our profession.

This year, the Joint Steering Committee of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the AAHA, and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) tabled the report (“The Current and Future Market for Veterinary Medical Services in the United States”) of a study that it had commissioned. The Executive Summary of the Report out-



lines the challenges facing the veterinary profession (3). It deals with the issues of veterinary income, the economic impact of large numbers of women in the profession, global demand, inefficiency of current delivery systems, supply and demand, and veterinary education. Among the conclusions reached by the authors of the summary were the following: “In veterinary private practice, recognition of the human/animal bond is an important determinant of a successful practice. There is a growing recognition that provision of veterinary services in a manner that acknowledges the human/animal bond will lead to better outcomes for veterinary practices and their patients,” and “Those who understand the bond apparently

will be more successful in private practice than those who do not.”

## What is *The Bond*?

*The Bond* is a concept that veterinarians have understood since they first decided that they wanted to be veterinarians; it is that unique, wonderful relationship that exists between a pet and its owner(s). All pet owners have a special relationship with their pet(s) that more often than not makes their pet(s) part of their family and part of their lives. People depend on their pets for spiritual, emotional, physical, and psychological strength. By recognizing and celebrating this bond and helping people and pets to live happier, healthier, and fuller lives, the veterinary profession can play a vital and prosperous role. As veterinarians increasingly promote and foster *The Bond*, they too will become part of *The Bond*. Furthermore, as stated in the Executive Summary (3), “Private practitioners must recognize the bond and provide services in a manner that acknowledges it, if they are to be successful.”

The newly revised mission statement of the AAHA incorporates *The Bond* and defines it as “Healthy Pets, Healthy Pet Owners, Healthy Pet Care Providers” (4). More specifically, the role of the veterinarian is defined not only in terms of the health of the pet but as playing a part in the stability of the family and the health of its members. Included under the heading of health care providers are not only veterinarians but hospital

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managers, receptionists, veterinary technicians, kennel attendants, and office personnel.

Dr. Peg Rucker is reported as saying, "The human/animal bond will be the salvation of the profession. I think that we have not done a good job of promoting the importance of the human/animal bond, which is the reason people have pets" (1).

In terms of day-to-day practice, what does *The Bond* mean to the average veterinarian? Don Dooley, a management consultant, is quoted as stating, "...if veterinarians really understood the bond between people and their pets, they would never hesitate to offer top-of-the-line medical care," and "If veterinarians believed in the human/animal bond, they would have a compelling and irrefutable reason to believe in themselves. The resulting self-esteem would have all sorts of positive ramifications — emotional, intellectual, and economic" (5).

A practice centering on *The Bond* maintains, above all else, the pledge to the patients under its responsibility to provide humane and compassionate care of the highest quality. Because of the importance of *The Bond* within the family unit, the *Bond-Centered Practice* actively promotes "wellness" through preventive care and counselling. This includes increased emphasis on proactive programs, such as nutritional counselling, pet loss support, and the promotion of healthcare and preventive medicine, rather than treatment of disease conditions alone. Veterinary efforts are directed towards the holistic approach to patient care.

For pet owners, a *Bond-Centered Practice* is a place where they can establish an honest and caring relationship with their veterinarian and hospital staff that goes beyond economics. It becomes a partnership based on confidence and mutual respect, which instills trust between owner and veterinarian.

### **The Bond and the economics of our profession**

According to the Executive Summary, there will continue to be downward pressure on the price of veterinary services and on the income of veterinarians (3). Combined with the fact that incomes of veterinarians have fallen in real terms, while incomes of physicians and dentists have experienced considerable growth, the economic future of the profession looks bleak indeed. Its salvation may well depend on veterinarians' acceptance of the importance of *The Bond*.

Some veterinary practitioners feel the need to keep their fees unrealistically low in order to remain competitive, often at a cost to their own economic well-being and that of their staff, and at the expense of quality care. Practice owners must be able to hire quality staff, pay them appropriately, purchase top-of-the-line diagnostic equipment, and provide the best possible therapeutic options to pet owners. Rather than concentrating on keeping prices low, *Bond-Centered Practices* concentrate on keeping the quality of veterinary care high.

Those of us who became veterinarians because we are passionate about animals and love our work must make

a decision: we can embrace the concept of *The Bond*, which includes ensuring not only healthy pets and owners but also healthy pet care providers, or we can continue being underpaid, working stressful hours, competing against our colleagues, underpaying our staff, and suffering an outflux of veterinary health care providers. Those who are passionate about their profession and love animals should not be punished economically for their dedication.

Many, if not most, veterinarians already incorporate the concept of *The Bond* to some degree in their practices. However, few place *The Bond* at the center of their practice philosophy. In the face of technological advances and increased efficiencies, the profession must rededicate itself to the original ideals of compassion and honest caring towards its patients and their owners.

The survival of the veterinary profession depends, in large part, on the acceptance and active promotion of *The Bond*. Veterinary care must not be permitted to become simply a commodity that is based only on cost and convenience. Those who would compete on the basis of price alone are failing to understand the real power of *The Bond*. In explaining the key to his company's astounding success, Michael Dell, chairman and CEO of Dell Computer Corporation, stated, "...building a business solely on cost or price..was not a sustainable advantage. There would always be someone with something that was lower in price or cheaper to produce. What was really important was sustaining loyalty among customers and employees, and that could only be derived from having the highest level of service and very high performing products" (6).

By establishing relationships with their clients, veterinarians can create a veterinarian/owner/pet bond, so that clients will remain loyal and be less likely to go "shopping." While economics should never be permitted to become the primary driving force, the concept of *The Bond* nevertheless does make good economic sense by increasing the potential for economic growth.

The veterinary practice that treats veterinary care simply as just another business designed to make money will be doomed to failure, while the practice that recognizes and celebrates the importance of *The Bond* will thrive in the future.

## **References**

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