

Pets & Other Animal Sentinels: Key Clinical Points

Reasons for Healthcare Providers to Communicate with Veterinarians:

- Global and local environmental change is affecting both humans and non-human animals.
- Animals may pose zoonotic disease risk to patient; however, animals get sick from many zoonotic diseases as well.
- Veterinarians receive more training than human health care professionals in zoonotic disease, but training is focused on disease in animals and risk mitigation. Therefore, integrated management of zoonoses will include management of disease in humans (by human health professionals), management of the disease in animals, and/or mitigation of risk factors.
- Animals may be more sensitive than humans to the effects of chemical pollution and other environmental hazards. Animals may therefore be “sentinels” of environmental change and health hazards relevant to humans, since there are usually shared environmental risks (eg. humans and animals sharing environments in close contact).
- Patients may ask human healthcare providers about concerns about a sick animal, so providers need to be ready to encourage referrals to a veterinarian.
- The human-animal bond is important. Since animals are considered “part of the family,” their health and healthcare may be prioritized. For instance, some patients will prioritize caring for an animal over self care, and visit a veterinarian for the animal before seeking healthcare for themselves. Death of an animal may be traumatic for family members, sometimes leading to depression and anxiety.
- Domesticated animals (and wildlife) are receiving increasingly sophisticated veterinary care, including diagnostics and imaging and treatments that are similar to those in human healthcare.
- Human healthcare pharmacies are often filling prescriptions for animal treatment as well.
- There is potential for medication errors and abuse between human and animal prescriptions.

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Opportunities for Interprofessional Practice:

- Develop protocols for regular communication between local veterinarians and human health clinicians.
- Develop regular meetings between human healthcare providers and veterinarians in a community.
- Contact veterinarian directly (telephone, email, etc.) with permission of patient.
- Request records release (with patient permission).
- Ask patients to convey message to their veterinarian.
- Contact your public health department to contact animal health officials.