

Pet ownership linked to depression

By Adele Horin April 24, 2004

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Older Australians who own a pet are more likely to be depressed and in poorer physical health than people who don't own pets, according to a major new Australian study.

Flying in the face of claims from the pet food industry, and others, the study shows pet ownership confers no health benefits to older people.

Indeed older pet owners are significantly more likely than the pet-free to be aggressive and hostile towards the world - perhaps because they prefer pets to people.

It brings Ruth Parslow, a research fellow at the Centre for Mental Health Research, at ANU, no joy to report her findings.

They are based on a survey of 2551 Australians aged 60-64.

Dr Parslow is devoted to her dog, Tammy, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, which she bring to work twice a week where it sleeps under her desk.

"I would have been happier finding that pets are good for you," she said. "But I wanted to do research that is reliable and statistically sound."

The study found older pet owners, most of them cat and dog owners, were more likely to be depressed, and to take more pain-killers than people who did not own pets; and female pet owners were in worse physical health than their pet-free counterparts. 

The pet owners were more likely to be loners who "liked others to be afraid of them", and "preferred to go their own way". And they visited the doctor just as often as the pet-free, contrary to other studies.

The findings are in line with research published last year by Dr Parslow and Professor Anthony Jorm, also a devoted dog owner, which showed pet owners did not have lower blood pressure than non-owners, and were not at lower risk of heart disease as had previously been claimed. In fact pet owners had higher blood pressure, were heavier, and more likely to smoke.

That study provoked a storm, prompting an adverse editorial in the *Medical Journal of Australia* by Dr Bruce Headey, the author of other research.

Dr Headey, of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, acknowledged in the editorial he had acted as a paid consultant to the Petcare Information and Advisory Service, funded by the pet food company Uncle Ben's. His work had concluded pets did confer health benefits.

He said cat and dog owners had saved the nation up to \$2.7 billion in health expenditure in 1994-95.

"About 50 per cent of adults and 70 per cent of adolescents who own pets report that they confide in them," he wrote. "It is most unlikely that all this communication and companionship is wasted."

However, Dr Parslow said Dr Headey's original study on GP visits was "statistically weak". The conclusions drawn were "not well-supported" by the data.

"Our reasons for persisting in this area of study is we were concerned a lot of the research done before had not been well-designed," she said.

Dr Parslow said she could not explain why pet ownership among the elderly was associated with adverse mental and physical health. It was unlikely pets were the sole cause of the problems.

"Maybe retired people are looking at options in their lives and their pets hold them back," she said.

The study, *Pet Ownership and Health in Older Adults*, is to be published in the journal *Gerontology*.