

Doctors, vets explore shared medical problems (Update)

November 1 2013, by Verena Dobnik

What do Siberian tigers and older women have in common?

That is among the questions related to fighting diseases that affect both animals and people that physicians and veterinarians are teaming up to explore at a conference in New York on Saturday.

The "Zoobiquity" conference takes its name from a best-selling book by Dr. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz, a cardiologist at the UCLA Medical Center who said that about 60 percent of diseases found in humans also hit most animal species.

Scientists from medical hubs including the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, the National Institutes of Health and The Wildlife Conservation Society at the Bronx Zoo, will compare animal and human cases.

"I believe I'll learn something from human-line physicians Saturday that could be immediately applied on Sunday to my animal patients, and perhaps they'll learn things from me for their human patients," says Dr. Richard Goldstein, chief medical officer at New York's Animal Medical Center.

Sloane-Kettering's Larry Norton, a global authority on breast cancer in older women, will present information on treatment for the disease, which is prevalent among Siberian tigers and other large jungle cats.

Scientists will also discuss a male gorilla with a seizure disorder, tumors in domestic ferrets and a California sea lion with an eating disorder.

Another shared illness being examined is malaria, in both penguins and people, and how it spreads through populations of birds in the wilderness.

Goldstein pointed out that veterinarians are able to study innovative treatments on animals that might not be legally allowed on humans. Some of those treatments are now being used on humans, including a melanoma cancer vaccine developed for dogs at Animal Medical Center being used on Sloan-Kettering patients.

"Animals are models for human diseases and because their life spans are shorter, the progression of a disease is more obvious," says Goldstein.

Especially useful to human medicine is how veterinarians approach behavioral and psychological problems, since their patients don't talk—just as humans with dementia or Alzheimer's may not be able to communicate.

"Vets are treating animals with anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorders, eating disorders, addictions—like wallabies in Tasmania eating poppies," says Natterson-Horowitz. "They look at environmental and genetic factors, and stress, and that informs the human cases."

Natterson-Horowitz started the animal-human medical dialogue about a decade ago when the Los Angeles Zoo asked the UCLA professor to help them tackle heart conditions in some great apes.

"I was a typical cardiologist, dealing with heart attacks, atrial fibrillation and high cholesterol," she says. "That opened my eyes to the concept of one health: All doctors can be thought of as veterinarians since all

patients are animals."

More information: www.zoobiquity.com

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