

Owners of seriously ill pets at risk of stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms

September 18 2017



Mary Beth Spitznagel, Ph.D. (right), a clinical neuropsychologist and associate professor at Kent State University, talks with a pet owner. Spitznagel co-authored a new article that examines pet caregiver burden and the pet owner's psychological experience in the context of sick pet caregiving. Credit: Kent State University

Owners of seriously or terminally ill pets are more likely to suffer with stress and symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as poorer quality of life, compared with owners of healthy animals, finds a study published by *Veterinary Record* today.

This 'caregiver burden' may also lead to increased [veterinarian](#) stress, say the authors.

Research on human caregiving describes '[caregiver](#) burden' as a response to problems and challenges encountered while providing informal care for a sick family member. But little is known about the [impact](#) of caregiver burden on owners of [animals](#) with chronic or terminal diseases - and the veterinarians who care for them.

So a team of researchers, led by Mary Beth Spitznagel at Kent State University in Ohio, set out to assess caregiver burden and psychosocial function in 238 owners of a dog or cat.

They compared 119 owners of an animal diagnosed with a chronic or terminal disease with 119 healthy controls blindly matched for owner age and sex and animal species.

Symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression were measured using recognised scales, and quality of life was assessed by questionnaire. Owners' demographic information was also recorded.

Results showed greater burden, stress and clinically meaningful symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as poorer quality of life, in owners of [animals](#) with chronic or terminal disease. Higher burden was also related to poorer psychosocial functioning.

The authors outline some study limitations which could have introduced bias, but they say their findings "may help veterinarians understand and

more effectively handle client distress in the context of managing the challenges of sick companion animal caregiving."

And they suggest that future research is needed to better understand risks for caregiver burden in the client, how this might be reduced, and how it impacts [veterinarian](#) wellbeing.

In a linked commentary, Katherine Goldberg calls for improved training for veterinarians around provision of [long term care](#) for serious illness. This includes tailoring treatment plans to client preferences, recognising when clients are distressed, and partnering with [mental health professionals](#) to provide support.

"This inaugural exploration of [caregiver](#) burden within a veterinary setting is the first step in assessing the [impact](#) of veterinary caregiving on clients, as well as the impact of client emotional distress on veterinarian wellbeing," writes Goldberg. "It is my hope that with continued dialogue, we will continue to build the literature in these essential areas."

More information: Mary Beth Spitznagel et al. Caregiver burden in owners of a sick companion animal: a cross-sectional observational study, *Veterinary Record* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/vr.104295](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.104295)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Owners of seriously ill pets at risk of stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms (2017, September 18) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-owners-ill-pets-stress-anxiety.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.