Editorial: Besotted by pets

Monitor editorial

- Hearts open to dogs and cats aren’t always open to humans.

Nearly half a million dogs and cats are covered by health insurance, and more than 40 million Americans are not. Even in a pet-crazed country, there is something decadent and perhaps immoral about that.

Americans now keep more than 130 million dogs and cats, plus countless parakeets, ferrets, gerbils, snakes, lizards, turtles, rats, fish and other critters. Pet owners spend $47 billion annually on their animals. That includes $19 million for veterinary care, according to "The Last Meow," a fascinating article by Burkhard Bilger in the current New Yorker. That’s three times as much as the federal government spends on welfare grants.

When those pets get old or sick, more of them are having their lives extended with CAT scans, MRIs, kidney transplants, radiation treatments, chemotherapy and other expensive treatments. Once such care became available, it began to be considered not only justifiable but also expected. Yet we live in a nation where many poor children never get to see a dentist.

We provide our own pets with protection from heartworm, feline leukemia and the other major, preventable diseases. But so far, we have drawn the line at having our beloved dog’s teeth cleaned. He’ll have to make do with rawhide bones.

We have been made to feel guilty about that. Many, we suppose, would argue that we should feel guilty.

But we haven’t taken our cat to a psychiatrist either, though the animal is clearly crazy. We are not among the 83 percent of owners who, according to the American Animal Hospital Association, refer to themselves as their pet’s mom or dad.

It is no longer uncommon for people who skimp on their own health care to spend thousands of dollars on an aged dog or cat that once would have been put down with tears and fond memories. The deep emotional attachment people have to their pets has combined with such big investments to change the responsibilities that come with pet ownership.

The animal world is falling prey to many of the ills of the human health care system. More people are suing veterinarians for malpractice and emotional damage when the outcome for Fido or Fluffy is unfavorable. That’s driving up the cost of veterinary care.

One state, Rhode Island, and cities including San Francisco and Boulder, Colo., have even gone so far as to redefine people as their pets’ "guardians," not their owners. That change could have some interesting legal ramifications.
Guardians are generally required to act in the best interest of the guarded at all times. Will that mean that our dog, or someone acting in his interest, can sue us for not having his teeth cleaned? Will we be legally obliged to pay for an organ transplant for the cat when millions of cats are euthanized each year for want of owners? Will the day come when veterinarians are sued for denying medical care to the animals of owners who cannot afford to pay?

We favor harsh punishment for those who abuse animals and measures to insure that all creatures are treated with kindness and respect. Still, it’s difficult to reconcile the vast sums - albeit of private, not public, money - spent on providing health care for animals while people go without.

Owners have always formed deep bonds with their pets, but in the past they were less inclined to mistake them for people.

We’re not sure how this new situation came about or if it is entirely healthy. Perhaps the answer can be found in the donation bins at the end of supermarket aisles. In our experience, there is always more food in the ones reserved for food for stray animals than in the bins dedicated to serving area food pantries.

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