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Learning from humans; the case of obesity

I recently participated in a roundtable discussion at the British Medical Association about obesity in pets. My perspective was unusual; I have no pets (apart from three chickens), and am a dietitian who has worked in primary care and public health, primarily in the field of human obesity. But as I was preparing for the meeting, I started thinking about the overlap between obesity in animals and people.

Obesity has been a serious health concern in humans for several decades now, and the current statistics are depressing, in children as well as adults. We are at the stage where it is more usual to suffer from overweight or obesity than to be a healthy weight; healthy weight is no longer 'normal' in the sense of being usual for adults. I hadn't realised until the roundtable that obesity was also such a concern in the animal world. But as we talked, I realised that this means that we have an opportunity to learn from what has worked and not worked in humans. We are making some progress in addressing obesity in people, but not a lot. As a species, we are genetically prone to gaining weight, so prevention is key. That has a lot to do with our environment and how it encourages us to consume more than we need from foods and drinks, and to be sedentary. Just think about all the cues to consume that surround us; marketing, advertising and price promotions. Then there's the taste, smell and sight of foods and drinks which are prominently displayed, relatively cheap and in large portion sizes. Similarly to children, the environment for pets is largely controlled by others, so education and behaviour of the owners needs to be prioritised.

The roundtable discussions suggested that there is a general lack of awareness among owners and many veterinary staff about obesity in animals and the implications of excessive body fatness for health. This is similar to what we see in humans; research has shown that parents are poor at recognising obesity in their children. We could criticise that, but it is unsurprising since one in three children aged 10-11 years in England is now either overweight or has obesity. That means when parents compare their own child to others, they are likely to be comparing their child to an overweight norm. Parents come in for a lot of criticism when it comes to their children and obesity. But if they cannot see the problem, how can they address it? Raising awareness is the first step, and that means healthcare staff have to have difficult conversations about a subject many are uncomfortable talking about. The same may be true for veterinary staff, but not mentioning it will not make the problem disappear. How the topic is raised; the words used and the tone in which they are used, are all important. Eating is about far more than nutrition, or calories. It is about love, nurturing and acceptance and this is the same whatever species we are talking about. Parents of children with obesity worry about depriving them of foods and drinks they enjoy. 'Diet' is seen as a deficit; a deprivation and a privation. Who would wish that on a much loved family member, of whatever species? How we frame healthy eating and appropriate portion size to pet owners is likely to impact on their willingness to work with us to tackle the problem. Exercise is the other part of weight

management, in all species. Perhaps pet owners, like humans, under-estimate the calories consumed and over-estimate the amount of exercise taken by their pets?

There is a lot of work to be done, but veterinary staff have the opportunity to learn from work with humans. Identifying the problem, raising the issue in a sensitive and non-judgemental way and working collaboratively with pet owners to help them understand why this matters is the start.