

TigerPlace: Training Veterinarians about Animal Companionship for the Elderly

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ABSTRACT

Students learn more effectively when they are actively engaged in the learning process. Therefore, case studies have become increasingly popular as a way to teach students about a representative subject. This article discusses the benefits of case studies, with a primary focus on how case studies can help veterinary medical students learn about the human-animal bond. The discussion is particularly aimed at veterinary medicine instructors and discusses how case studies can be used and why they are important. TigerPlace, a pet-friendly, innovative housing facility for older adults, is used as an example of a case study that can be used to teach about, and to study, the human-animal bond. In particular, the article addresses the special advantages of TigerPlace to students with respect to learning about older adults and the bond they have with their pets.

Key words: elderly clients, human-animal bond, TigerPlace

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that students learn more effectively when they are actively involved in the learning process. Using a case study as an example and encouraging students to come up with their own examples is one way to help students become active participants in their own learning.

Often, the easiest way to teach students is to meet them at their own level. Many university students—even at the graduate level—are egocentric and tend to be very biographical, using their prior experiences as examples instead of thinking outside their own lives. By introducing a case study as an example, it is often possible to induce students to use a higher level of thinking by making them partners in the learning process and opening up lines of communication in the classroom. By discussing the case study, students become familiar with an example of the topic under consideration, and they may then be more willing to discuss examples that they have encountered in their own lives. For instance, an instructor may wish to discuss the human-animal bond (HAB) as it pertains to older adults, and therefore introduces a case study of an older adult who benefited from owning a pet, then opens up the topic for discussion. Students may then be stimulated to develop their own examples after hearing or reading the case study. Introducing case studies as a teaching method can lead effectively to exercises that involve asking students to write their own case studies.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND IN ACTION: TIGERPLACE, A CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE

Research has shown that older adults who own pets receive a variety of health benefits from their relationships with their pets. Older pet owners have been found to be more physically active and to have less deterioration in activities of daily living (ADL) over time,¹ as well as lower serum triglycerides;² they are also less likely to die within one year of a heart attack.³ Beck and Katcher summarize years of

research on the potential health benefits of pets in their book *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship*.⁴ They report that touching and talking with a pet, or even just having a pet in the room, can reduce blood pressure. They also report that people with pets make fewer doctor visits and have lower blood lipid levels. However, despite the abundance of research evidence that pets are beneficial to older adults, many retirement communities and nursing facilities do not allow older adults to bring their pets when they move in, although the number of such facilities that do allow pets is increasing.

One case-study example is a facility that is not only pet friendly, but encourages pets and could be used to teach veterinary medical students about the benefits of the HAB, particularly for older adults. TigerPlace is an innovative, pet-encouraging housing facility for older adults that consists of 32 apartments. The idea for TigerPlace was developed through the University of Missouri Sinclair School of Nursing Aging in Place Project.

The goals of the Aging in Place Project include the following:

- For the residents, ongoing assessment, early illness recognition, health-promotion activities, and a well-designed housing environment to help older people stay healthier and active longer, avoid expensive and debilitating hospitalizations, and, for most, avoid the need for relocation to a nursing home.
- For the university, to provide an exciting nursing practice (Sinclair Home Care) and place (TigerPlace) for interdisciplinary research to improve the lives of older people, new educational opportunities for students across all colleges and schools, and an ideal practice environment for health care providers of the future to create and learn better ways of caring for older people.
- For public policy makers, Sinclair Home Care and TigerPlace bring together the research, education,

and practice skills of university faculty so that complex cost-effectiveness and elder outcome questions can be answered to guide public-policy decisions about services for older people such as those funded by Medicare or Medicaid.

The Aging in Place project has two major complementary parts: Sinclair Home Care (SHC) and TigerPlace. Sinclair Home Care is a licensed home health agency developed with the assistance of a \$2 million grant from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) to research and evaluate the effectiveness of aging in place for frail older adults. SHC provides a wellness center on the premises of TigerPlace, ongoing assessment of residents' needs, and health-promotion activities, including exercise and health classes, to help residents remain active and vital. SHC also provides an array of home health services such as medication management, assistance with ADL, and care coordination of health conditions with residents' physicians and other health care providers. SHC also provides Medicare home care when residents need and qualify for that service. TigerPlace was developed by Americare Systems, Inc., of Sikeston, Missouri. Americare is the "landlord" and provides meal service, housekeeping, transportation, and concierge-type activity planning.

TigerPlace is innovative in several ways. First, it is a new model of long-term care for older adults, in that they are able to age in place in the home environment of their choice with supportive health care services as needed. Although other facilities purport to allow aging in place, TigerPlace is the first facility in Missouri, and likely the nation, that allows residents to continue living in their apartments regardless of how their needs for care change. This model aims to prevent the recurrent relocation of older adults when their needs for care intensify, thus minimizing the anxiety, depression, and loss of function that occur when older adults relocate. For many, moving to a nursing home can lead to increased depression, anxiety, hopelessness, feelings of isolation and abandonment, increased morbidity and mortality,^{5,6} or relocation stress syndrome (RSS).⁷

Second, TigerPlace allows older adults to bring their pets with them when they move in. Pet-friendly design features include screened porches, outside doors for each apartment, wide windowsills, tile floors in entryways, walking trails, and the TigerPlace Pet Initiative (TiPPI). TiPPI is a cross-disciplinary, collaborative program between the University of Missouri Sinclair School of Nursing and the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine (UMCVM). The underlying principle of this program is that human-animal interaction and the human-animal bond are beneficial to the health of older adults. This idea is based on the research showing that older adults live longer, healthier, and happier lives when they own or regularly interact with a pet. The TiPPI program is an exciting new practice area for veterinarians. With more facilities like TigerPlace, older adults would not have to give up their pets in order to get the support and care that they need. They could also maintain their relationships with their veterinarians. TiPPI has five specific aims:

- To foster a pet-inclusive environment in the TigerPlace aging-in-place residential facility. This includes the PAWsitive Visits program, in which

different animals are brought to TigerPlace each week for residents to learn about and interact with.

- To facilitate excellent veterinary care of TigerPlace residents' pets while simultaneously providing an invaluable learning opportunity for veterinary students to work with older-adult clients. A particularly innovative component of TigerPlace is in-house veterinary care for the resident pets via the UMCVM. The fully equipped veterinary exam room enables older adults to simply walk their animals down the hall to see a veterinarian. A faculty clinician works with veterinary medical students to provide care to pet residents of TigerPlace.
- To promote research into the benefits of human-animal interaction and the HAB.
- To provide foster care and adoption services for bereaved pets of TigerPlace when their owners are deceased or can no longer care for them. The pet is supported by a foster home with another TigerPlace resident or, if this is not possible, in a foster home in the community until permanent adoption takes place.
- To provide needed support to pet owners in the day-to-day care of their animals. The UMCVM's Research Center for Human Animal Interaction employs a "pet assistant," commonly an undergraduate student, who visits pets and their owners twice weekly. The pet assistant checks on pet-food availability, empties cats' litter boxes, walks dogs if owners are feeling unwell on a particular day, and inquires as to any pet-related needs.

The practices of allowing older adults to bring their pets with them, providing in-house support of pet ownership, and offering an on-site veterinary clinic are based on the belief that older adults benefit from interactions with animals. Social networks tend to be more restricted in later years,⁸ because of the growing number of losses that older adults experience.^{9,10} Older adults are at increased risk of losing their partners and peers through death, retirement, and limitations in mobility.¹¹

TigerPlace is a great resource not only for researchers but also for veterinary medical students. TigerPlace allows students to learn about the HAB and also about specific needs of older adults and their pets. Veterinarians' relationships with older adults may be different from their relationships with younger clients because older adults may have more concerns about how to take care of their pets as they themselves age. Concerns may also arise about the costs of pet care on a fixed income, about what will happen to the pet after the owner dies, or about behavioral issues and bonding questions. For some older adults, their relationship with their pet may be the most important one in their lives. Veterinary medical students need a chance to work with older-adult clients in order to learn about their specific needs. This is especially important because of the current demographic shift in the US population toward larger numbers of older adults.

HAB researchers and veterinary medical students can also gain knowledge about relocation stress syndrome (RSS) among older adults and how pets can help. RSS is defined as "physiologic and/or psychosocial disturbances as a

result of transfer from one environment to another.”⁷ Older adults relocating to a nursing home are particularly susceptible to this syndrome, which is characterized by symptoms such as depressed mood, anxiety, impaired social functioning,¹³ gastrointestinal problems, loneliness, sad affect, sleep difficulties, social isolation, and weight loss.¹³ Investigators have found that older adults exposed to pets shortly after admission to a nursing home were less lonely than those who did not interact with pets.¹⁴

TigerPlace is clearly a model of a unique aging experience that can be used to teach students about the human-animal bond. One of the goals of TigerPlace is to design and implement exciting research, education, and practice opportunities while integrating TigerPlace into the University of Missouri campus and the surrounding community. The learning opportunities available at TigerPlace for those studying the HAB are immense. Several research projects have already been completed, several more are currently underway, and more are to be developed in the coming years. It is clear that TigerPlace, in a single facility, provides both an abundant source of data for researchers and a prolific learning environment for students.

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