



Pets ARE good for EU: Stakeholders and experts commit to drive public debate on the benefits of pet ownership for healthy active ageing

What do pets have to do with healthy active ageing you might ask? A whole lot, it was revealed during a conference on the topic, hosted by Mars, Incorporated, and Forum Europe in the Bibliothèque Solvay in Brussels, Belgium, on May 4th, 2017. Around 50 representatives from the European Parliament, the European Commission, Permanent Representations, national parliament liaison offices, NGOs, universities, practitioner associations and industry discussed the role pets can play in finding solutions to challenges raised by population ageing – from individual health and wellbeing to national budgets squeezed by healthcare cost. They agreed pet ownership needs to play an important part in the healthy active ageing discussion and attendees committed to drive the conversation in Europe.



Speakers and panellists included Heinz K. Becker (MEP, EPP, Austria), Myriam Cohen (Regional President Mars Petcare Europe), Prof. Marie-José Enders-Slegers (Open University of The Netherlands), Dr. Sandra McCune (Scientific Leader, Human-Animal Interaction, WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition), and Dr. Elizabeth Ormerod.



Click [here](#) to watch Mars Petcare’s video on the important role of pets in supporting a healthy and active ageing society.

The European society is getting older every day: in 2018, 29% of the population will be over 50 years, and by 2050, there will be more old than young people. “Getting older is the biggest achievement of humankind”, noted MEP Heinz K. Becker, but it is putting a strain on healthcare and social systems, and challenges families getting smaller in size and living further apart than in the past. At the same time, we’re seeing a new paradigm of the older generation redefining what it means to be old, able to stay in the workplace for longer and contribute to society. Governments are challenged to develop policies to support the desired quality of life during a longer lifespan.

Pet ownership offers health and economic benefits

How can we solve these challenges? This is where pets come in. Research from Mars’ WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition, as well as other academic studies show that owning and interacting with a pet comes with some powerful positive impact on healthy active ageing:

1. **Physical health benefits:** Pets help owners live a longer and healthier life. They encourage physical activity, thus improving cardiovascular health and reducing the risk of immobility. “In fact, older age dog owners are twice more likely to maintain their mobility over time”, Dr. Sandra McCune explained.
2. **Emotional benefits:** Caring for a pet can reduce stress and anxiety, provide loyal companionship and reduce instances of loneliness and depression, particularly after bereavement.

3. **Social benefits:** Pets, but particularly dogs, get elderly out of the home and act as a common ground to spark a conversation. Older pet owners have more social connections and are more active in society than non-owners.

As a result, older people require less support from the healthcare and support system, so there are **economic benefits** as well. “The cost saving of companion animals to the health system was €5.6 billion in the year 2000 in Germany alone, while it has been estimated to be £2.5 billion per year in the United Kingdom”, Myriam Cohen, Regional President of Mars Petcare Europe highlighted. In addition, pet ownership contributes to the economy, through pet food production and sale, animal health and veterinary services.



But there are barriers to pet ownership for the older generation. Responsible pet ownership costs money, caregivers sometimes don't want to support the pet care or are afraid of infections, and in other cases environmental factors, such as a lack of green or safe walking spaces, hinder pet ownership. Most substantially, pets are often not allowed in rental or retirement housing, requiring elderly people to give away their pets when they move or rules changes.

EU to act as a convener of debate to develop better, research-based policies

Event attendees discussed how to overcome these challenges and agreed there is a need for a concerted and consistent effort to raise awareness among politicians, institutions, but also health and veterinary professionals, caregivers and housing managers. Success will depend equally on the European institutions and EU member states to develop guidelines and policies, and practitioners to include pet ownership and interaction as part of their caregiving.

MEP Becker emphasised that we need to give top priority to lifetime healthy ageing to ensure people's quality of life. Given that pet ownership can reduce the cost of ageing to national health systems, there should be an incentive for policymakers to get involved. Becker offered his support to motivate the European institutions and EU member states to develop guidelines and policies that provide a better structure and encourage lifelong pet ownership. While the EU itself cannot legislate in this area, it can be a forum to debate, convene the diverse stakeholder groups and guide the member states to move in one direction.

Practitioners underlined the importance of making pet ownership a part of professional healthcare to ensure access and funding. We need to formulate protocols and quality standards and make them part of the curricula to educate practitioners.



Attendees didn't just talk research and evidence. During the breaks, they had the opportunity to stroke and play with dogs, courtesy of Belgian association Activ' Dog, to experience first-hand what a positive impact pets can have on breaking the ice and encouraging conversation.

All this needs to be based on a thorough scientific base to make informed and effective decisions. Dr. Sandra McCune highlighted that a large body of research on human animal interaction as well as pets in healthy active ageing has already been developed by academics as well as national health institutes and industry, such as Mars' WALTHAM Centre, and more research projects are expected to be completed over the next two years.