We can sometimes feel childish in wishing our pets would live forever. After all, they provide us with company, an avenue for stress relief, amusement, and unequivocal love. It is therefore not ridiculous to try to prolong the life of our pet, but to do this we need to keep them as healthy as possible by becoming the best owners we can be. It is not only in the best interests of us, but also in the best interests of our pets.

**Our obligation to Welfare Standards**

In many cases, we have a legal obligation to ensure the welfare of the animals in our care is protected. This means providing our pets with the “5 Freedoms”: freedom from hunger and thirst; from discomfort; from pain, injury and disease; from fear and distress; and freedom to express its natural behaviour. Simple measures to be taken that fulfil these requirements include:

- Providing ready access to fresh water and adequate food
- Allowing access to a sheltered and comfortable resting area
- Instigating immediate veterinary treatment as required
- Minimising environmental and social changes that may be stressful to the animal
- Providing sufficient space and opportunity for the animal to behave naturally and interact with other animals

These are the minimum standards of care, but we can improve our management of our pets to optimise their health and well-being, thus bettering the quality and longevity of life for which we spend with them.

**Prevention rather than Cure**

A key component of preventing illness in our pets is recognising when things are no longer normal, and being proactive to stop the onset of disease from progressing further. The first step is to have a clear recognition of what is normal – how do they behave in normal situations, what are their quirks, how do they move, what do the different parts of their body look like, how does their coat feel, how often do they eat, drink, defecate, and urinate? This means observing and handling our pets on a frequent basis. When we observe a change in the normal behaviour or appearance of our pet, it is then vital that we take action by presenting the animal as soon as possible to a veterinarian.

The veterinarian has extensive knowledge and experience to deduce what might be happening within the body of our ill animal and the expertise to recommend and implement treatment. Not only is it simpler and more effective to treat the animal at an early stage of disease, our pets will suffer less and recover more quickly if the required intervention is applied as soon as a correct diagnosis can be made.

Many diseases can be easily prevented through good husbandry. Parasitic disease, as an example, can be debilitating but simple measures can be taken to reduce the risk of infection. These include daily faecal removal from the pet’s environment, regularly cleaning bedding and areas where the pet spends the majority of their time, and stringently adhering to chemical treatment regimens as recommended by your veterinarian.

Vaccinations and parasite treatments are economically viable in the long-term by the prevention of costs associated with immediate and on-going veterinary treatment should the
animal suffer disease. Many preventative treatments are very accessible due to commercially-available topical and oral applications that are simple and quick to administer, without veterinary training.

**Good Health through Good Nutrition**

It is important to recognise that animals digest and absorb nutrients from food differently to humans and as a consequence, they require specific diets that can differ markedly from our own. Significant differences also exist between animal species and a good pet food has been designed to match the nutrient requirements of a particular species at a particular life-stage. Just like humans, young animals have different needs to adults, which are different to old animals and to pregnant and lactating animals. Veterinarians are not only useful to pet owners when things have gone wrong; they can have considerable knowledge in pet nutrition and can help formulate a healthy and balanced diet for your pet. Following the feeding instructions of a formulated diet is crucial to ensuring our pets get the correct balance and quantity of energy and nutrients, since these diets are often designed by experts in pet nutrition. Regular consultation with your veterinarian is also beneficial for monitoring our pets' nutritional status, often through evaluation of body condition. Maintaining a consistent and moderate body condition, neither under-weight nor over-weight, will reduce the risk of disease and prolong the life of the animal. As owners, learning to body score our pets can assist us in keeping our pets in optimum condition between veterinary appointments.

*Environmental Enrichment*

Our pets need to be physically and mentally stimulated just like we do. Interacting daily with our pets and providing time-consuming toys as methods of amusement when we’re not there can enrich their lives, as well as prevent destructive behaviour occurring that often results from boredom. Regular interaction will also improve the affectionate bond between human and animal, making the time we spend with them more enjoyable. We can directly benefit from the exercise needs of our pets as they can provide the necessary motivation for us to be active and socialise with other people. Particularly in homes where the space for pets to play and run is limited, taking the pet out for walks can be mentally and physically refreshing for both the animal and owner. Arrangements can be made to meet up with family and friends on a regular basis, and there are more opportunities for animal-animal interactions to also give our pets the chance for them to socialise.

We can further stimulate our pets through educating and disciplining them to respond in an appropriate manner to our presence and commands. As owners, we can practise patience and perseverance by challenging ourselves with this task. Repetition and immediate reinforcement and reward of basic training principles, especially during the early stages of training, are essential for successful establishment of good behaviour. Knowing how our pets will behave towards ourselves and other people and being able to control our pets in different or unpredictable environments will reduce the stress and concern we may otherwise experience.

**Community Responsibilities**

Good training of our pets to be responsive to our commands, to stay within the limits of their home environment, and to interact...
positively with other animals and people can enhance their safety and the safety of others in the community. Participating in puppy school programs is one method of starting our young animals on the road to controllable and positive interactive behaviour in the presence of other animals and people. If we can discipline our pets to stay within secure boundaries when they are not supervised, we minimise the risk of our pets being a nuisance or danger to other members of the community, prevent our pets becoming infected with disease agents from uncontrolled environments and other animals, and reduce the risk of our pets getting inadvertently injured in unfamiliar environments.

Domesticated animals can cause detrimental ecological effects and as such, we as owners should attempt to minimise any negative impacts of our pets on the environment. Native wildlife is susceptible to predation by our pets, due to their natural hunting instincts and in some cases, boredom. Protection of our native species can be achieved by simply restricting or controlling access to wildlife habitats with appropriate enclosures and restraint, interacting daily with our pets, and providing time-consuming toys as methods of amusement when they are not supervised. When we take our pets out of their home environments into the community, we should be mindful to ensure our pets aren’t likely to shed infection to other animals by ensuring they are up-to-date on preventative treatments and that we remove and dispose of their excretory waste from the environment appropriately.

Whilst some of us may choose to breed the pets that we own, for the pet from which we have no intention of producing offspring, de-sexing has many benefits. Individually, a neutered pet can have many advantages in how we care for them. Nutrient requirements are lowered so they require less energy to be fed in their diet; if their diet is adjusted to compensate for this new body status, obesity with its subsequent predilection for disease and reduced life-span can be avoided, and economically there can be benefits from the change from a higher to a lower energy diet. Pets can become more responsive and display less aggression and territorial behaviour, which further aids our attempts to train them and improves our bond with them. In the community, there is often a surplus of animals that are born from intentional or accidental breeding because the owners have neglected to take into consideration where these young animals will end up as adults. Numerous animals in the community are kept in unacceptable conditions and may be euthanised to prevent them suffering a poor quality life when the necessary minimum standard of care cannot be provided.

*Pet Ownership can be Rewarding and Fun!*

We have an obligation to our pets to provide them with a healthy and comfortable life and in return, we can benefit by having a pleasurable and long-lasting relationship with them. To assist us in achieving this goal, the veterinarian has an important role in nurturing the bond between the owner and the pet. As professionals in the field of animal health, they can provide crucial management and treatment advice that will optimise the quality and duration of time that we can spend with our pets. Excellent and regular communication between veterinarians and owners is the corner-stone of successful implementation of disease prevention and management in the best interests of us and our pets. Whilst we know our pets won’t live forever, there are many ways in which we can make the time we spend with them, as long and delightful as possible. Owning a pet shouldn’t be tedious – the greater our commitment to responsible pet ownership, the more pleasure & satisfaction we can gain from this intimate relationship.