Why I... keep animals

Community doctor Clare Nettleton tells Kathy Oxtoby why animals have always been a key to her soul

Kathy Oxtoby journalist

Clare Nettleton has a constant companion who reminds her just how much animals mean to people. Basil, her springer spaniel pup and an unofficial therapy dog, regularly accompanies her on visits to patients at the Williton Community Hospital for stroke rehabilitation and care at the end of life in Somerset, where she works as an associate specialist.

She recalls the time when they were both at the bedside of a young mother recovering from a severe stroke: “When I asked her how she was doing, she said, ‘Today’s a better day because Baz is here.’”

Basil “the friendliest dog” brings “smiles to the faces of patients throughout the hospital,” says Nettleton. “He helps them enormously, particularly those who have been on the ward for a long time. Just having an animal there, and having that bond at the bedside, makes all the difference to their day.”

Animals have had a huge impact on her own life too—and it’s not only Basil who makes her smile when she returns home from work. The rest of her animal family includes four cats, five chickens, three ducks, and a bearded dragon lizard named Daisy.

“The love from my animals is unconditional. They’re always so happy to see me,” says Nettleton.

Her love for animals stems from a “feeling of companionship, and a sense of connection, which caring and looking after them creates.”

She says, “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want to have animals.” Some of her earliest memories are visiting her grandparents’ farm in Wales, where she would wake up at 5 am to help her grandfather “do the rounds” of helping feed the cows, pigs, sheep, and hens.

Growing up in north west London, her family had gerbils, cats, and a slow worm. In 2001 she and her then husband and two children moved to west Somerset and then in 2015 to her current house in the village of Dunster, where over the years her family of animals has continued to grow.

Keeping animals comes with responsibilities, she says, from feeding routines to dog walks to organising pet sitters when the family is away. Taking an animal into your home is a “commitment—animals are not ‘one hit wonders,’” and when choosing an animal “you need to ensure they will fit into your lifestyle,” she emphasises.

Living in a rural community, many of her patients share her love of animals. “They bring real joy to people. My patients like to share their photos of their animals, and I share mine.

“It’s good to have animals on the wards. Patients absolutely love Basil’s visits. One patient in end-of-life care reached out to stroke him from her bed, her face wreathed in smiles. She passed away soon afterwards, but it was comforting to know Basil had given her a precious moment.”

Personal benefits

Keeping animals also brings her personal benefits. “Having animals around is a brilliant way to wind down.” It also helps her stay active. “I live on Exmoor with a springer spaniel who lives for running. So I have all the health benefits of exercising outside in nature. And there’s nothing like going for a good dog walk in the freezing cold and pouring rain and returning to the warmth of home,” she says.

Keeping animals is a “great stress reliever” and can help to deal with the pressures of being a clinician, she says. “They make you feel so much better. They help protect against burnout. And, during bleak times, particularly during the pandemic, having animals has really helped me.”

Her dream is to own a smallholding. And when she looks to her future, she cannot imagine it without animals. “Keeping animals, whether one or many, can really enrich your life and the lives of those around you, including your patients.”

“You build such lovely relationships with animals. They are so intuitive. If I’m unwell or unhappy, Basil knows, and he will just put his head on my lap. Animals recognise and respond to our feelings and bring that quiet comfort. They give us so much.”

How to make the change

- When considering keeping an animal, always look to adopt or rescue: there are millions of animals that need a home.
- If you decide to keep animals make sure they will suit your lifestyle. With dogs, think about their needs: a springer spaniel, for example, will need lots of exercise and open spaces.
- Talk to other people who keep animals to hear their advice and tips. If you want to keep chickens, for example, speak to those in the know.
- Keeping animals can be great if you have children. Involve them in the care—it will teach them about the “circle of life” and the importance of looking after others.