

# Social work meets veterinary medicine

by John Martin

“The first time I considered becoming a social worker was when I was mistaken for one,” says Katherine Goldberg '18, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM), who is studying for her master of social work (MSW) degree at Falk College.

Goldberg was giving input during a discussion of euthanasia on the Veterinary Social Work listserv. “I guess my two cents had a considerable amount of ‘social work-speak’ in it because I received more than one email indicating that listserv members thought I was a social worker, before realizing I was a veterinarian,” she says. “I took this as a serious compliment.”

Goldberg who got her DVM from Cornell, founded her practice, Whole Animal Veterinary Geriatrics & Hospice Services, in 2010. She is also co-founder of the Veterinary Society for Hospice and Palliative Care, which aims to advance veterinary medical knowledge, professional education, community engagement, and research in hospice and palliative care.

Goldberg stresses the concept of family as patient. “This is a core value of my practice,” she says. “It is important that we ask about people’s values and priorities regarding the treatment of their pets. These may change over time, this is not a one-time conversation, but needs to be revisited. We need to know what values and fears we are dealing with so we can best facilitate individualized support. This is called ‘goal-concordant care,’ and is a central principle of my work.”

Goldberg says we would never dream of providing 24-hour care to aging and ill human family members without professional assistance. “Yet this is what we expect of ourselves for our beloved pets, and then we feel guilty when we can’t do it. I think people deserve support around this,



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and it needs to be something that we are talking about within the veterinary profession.”

That’s where social worker expertise comes in. “Social workers can provide skilled support for animal caregivers in areas like navigating end-of-life care, loss and bereavement,” she says.

Veterinary professionals also can benefit from their assistance, as pets become more important in families. Goldberg cites research that states that more than 75 percent of pet owners say their dog’s health is as important to them as their own; 30 percent of pet owners report grief lasting more than six months following pet loss; and 12 percent experience severe grief, resulting in a major life disruption.

Assuaging all these owners is taking its toll. “There is a mental health crisis in the veterinary profession;

compassion fatigue, moral stress, and high suicide rates are serious concerns,” Goldberg says. “The connection between these issues and end-of-life care in veterinary practice is now being explored. Veterinarians experience death five times more than human physicians, yet end-of-life training is not required in veterinary school the way it is for physicians. The impact of all this needs more attention and support.”

Goldberg’s practice blends medical care with a respect for the unique relationship between animals and their caregivers. This human-animal bond is recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals, “influenced by the behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both.”