

# A hidden pet crisis

**Dr Aine Seavers MVB MRCVS, writes about initiatives set up by her practice in Australia to help address the issue of pets inadvertently left home alone when their sole human carer is suddenly taken ill. The author believes that due to societal trends, this is an issue that will only become more acute in the years ahead and hopes that some of the ideas in this article may help inspire appropriately adapted measures in Ireland**

As a society, we are becoming increasingly insular and disconnected from those around us. Many family members live thousands of miles away from one another, and as people age, there is often no family left with which to connect. Animals, especially dogs and cats, fill the void and provide much love, comfort and companionship to all of us, but especially to those living alone. These companions are of great benefit to our health and well-being. Pet ownership is to be supported and encouraged. However, pets of owners living alone or in the care of a sole pet-sitter have specific issues of concern that must be addressed.

## THE 'HOME-ALONE PET'

The problem of the 'home-alone pet' arises most often when the sole human carer is suddenly taken ill at home. 999 is called and our wonderful paramedic heroes arrive to, in most cases, transport the human patient to the hospital. Sometimes the patient will return home but sometimes they don't. What happens to their pet in those early days?

On the day of the 999 calls, the paramedics, or indeed a coroner, have very little time to concentrate on the well-being of the family pet. That doesn't mean that knowing they have left a pet behind does not dwell on the medical responders' minds and hence negatively impact their own lives. Often the medical assistance teams only have enough time to fill up the water bowl for the animal, secure the property and leave. The

paramedics have enough to deal with; they shouldn't be left to carry the weight of this pet issue as well.

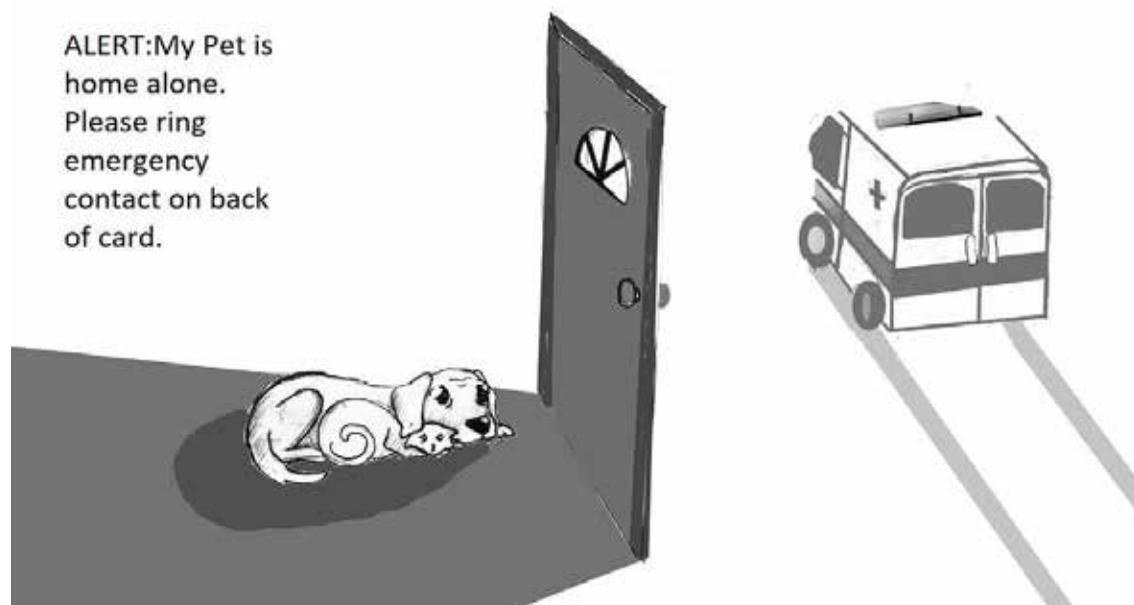
Reporting the home-alone pet can be done by the paramedics alerting the SPCA, but days may pass before the SPCA can attend to do a forced entry. A young healthy dog might recover from such a gap in care. Not so an elderly dog, or medicated pet, or any cat. After 48 hours left alone, these pets are in real jeopardy.

Another potential scenario is where the owner is taken ill or injured away from the home. We had a very distressing situation here in Australia during one Christmas holiday when a pet-sitter suffered a stroke and was unable to communicate the location of the sitting site. His contact details worked to find his next-of-kin, but they in turn had no idea of the location of the client. As the contact details of the home were only recorded in the pet-sitter's address book at said unknown site, it was impossible to track down where these pets were – pets who had now been locked in the house for at least five days. It took a nationwide police and media alert to finally track down their owner some days later.

## FINDING SOLUTIONS

So what can we as a society do to reduce this toll on our pets, owners and medical responders? I don't have all the answers but do have some suggestions.

We must educate widely on the need to have an emergency



**Figure 1.** The front and back of an intentionally plain and visually stark alert card developed by Dr Seavers's practice. This is also the artwork featured in the practice's home-alone pet poster.



**Figure 2.** An example of the home-alone pet alert card from the New South Wales Government's Trustee and Guardian (TAG) Programme.

backup support or care plan in place for our pets. The time to make emergency plans is long before you ever might need them.

My initial suggestions for practical steps that could be taken are:

1. Wider promotion of information on this topic. In addition to raising the profile of the issue on various social media platforms, there remains a need for TV/radio/newspaper articles highlighting the situation and the means to address it. While not all single owners are elderly owners, many elderly owners do still find, and indeed preferentially trust, their news through traditional media like tv, radio, print etc.
2. The introduction of alert cards. Owners and pet-sitters should be encouraged to carry a wallet-sized alert card – both as a printed hard copy and as an electronic version. The card should:
  - a. alert the finder that the ill/injured person has an unattended pet at home and provide an emergency contact number for a person who can look after that pet; or,
  - b. indicate the person has an unattended pet at home but that no emergency contact is available.

In the case of b) above, the card-holder gives permission for an SPCA officer, Council Ranger (in the Australian context), or police officer to immediately attend the home and rescue the pet.

In Australia, without such prior authorisation, it can take several days for a forced entry to be legally allowed by any person, even SPCA officers. Currently, in some districts, a notice has to be posted on the door of the house and, if no one contacts authorities in 72 hours, then the house can be entered and the pet retrieved. In Australia, we need to remove that waiting period and get to the pets faster.

Aside from an alert card kept in their wallet, owners should also have these cards prominently displayed in a standard location in homes, so the paramedics know where to quickly look to retrieve the permission card.

Ideally, I would love for an owner's medical alert button to also have a 'sister' button that again can be left in a standard

place. This 'sister' button could be pushed and activated by paramedics as they leave. This would alert the service that a home-alone pet issue has occurred, with permission given for Council Ranger, police or SPCA to respond to that home-alone pet as soon as possible.

For emergency access to the house, we recommend that owners living alone, or who have a sole pet-sitter staying, make arrangements to ensure a lockable key has been safely secured discreetly in the garden to facilitate a keyed entry. Aside from reducing property damage, a keyed entry is less distressful for pets than a forced entry. In Australia, relocatable key safes have become standard issue for paramedics and for Airbnb guests to access properties, and would be useful in the home-alone pet scenario.

Sole owners should be encouraged/allowed to enrol on a database with animal welfare leagues or SPCAs where emergency boarding programmes are available. At my practice, we advise our elderly clients to ensure any checking-in service, or home care providers that they use, should hold a record of permission to allow immediate entry to retrieve their pet, should the owner be incapacitated.

#### AVAILING OF EXISTING RESOURCES

What can be of great help is where a competent organisation takes control of the issue of the home-alone pet and operates a programme long-term to provide aid to this cohort. When I first started raising the alert on this issue in Australia, by complete happenstance, I came upon a TV advert for the New South Wales (NSW) Government's Trustee and Guardian Programme. I realised that this body, which deals with the needs of singles or elderly people, would be a perfect fit for our campaign on behalf of home-alone pets. I contacted the programme organisers, who replied, requesting more information and data. The result, over a year later, was a new TAG Programme that could support the pet of a Trustee client. The TAG Programme in Australia is a solid step in the right direction. It's a win for animal welfare but it's also part of the One Health approach, where vets and medics should work together to ensure better outcomes for humans and animals alike.

While the TAG card and programme are wonderful in general and especially for the person living alone, there is a weak link in the TAG chain: specifically, owners who don't live alone normally (e.g., large families) but have some sole family member or pet-sitter mind their pets when the main family is away.

What happens to the family pets if the sole pet-sitter is injured or becomes ill outside the home? At my practice, our solution was to supply our alert cards (Figure 1) to client owners who employed pet-sitters. The image on our card is deliberately plain, literally and figuratively in black and white, so that whether or not the person finding the card speaks the local language, the image itself says it all: "Pet home alone: get help".

The image also matches our larger home-alone pet poster; so that we can ensure continuity and allow for fast identification of our programme to raise awareness of the animal and the owner advocacy issues at stake.

The practice has asked dog breeders to consider having their clubs print out cards to hand out at shows and for all newly sold pups to be provided with an emergency contact card as part of the sale. We put the cards in all our puppy packs and puppy class show-bags to raise the issue from day one with new pets.

**DON'T BE AGEIST!**

There are much younger folk that also live alone, as well as the elderly, so be inclusive in your approach. The more we can share and spread the word the better the outcome for everyone. In this way, we can all have a huge animal welfare impact both locally and across the country.

**POST-RESCUE**

The pet has been rescued from the home: what now? I personally believe these animals are better off in actual homes rather than in commercial or charity shelters. Sole isolated owners tend to live quieter lives. Extracting these pets to be then placed in noisy high-traffic veterinary or SPCA settings is not ideal. Most veterinary cages are not suitable for extended stays for any animal, let alone a healthy one.

The SPCA kennels would be slightly better as they are designed for longer-stay clientele but animals suddenly plucked from their homes, need to be able to have quiet and space to move around in an environment that mimics their normal home and daily life. We don't put left-alone children

into the local doctor's surgery, hospital or institution when rescued. The human child goes into an emergency foster care home. We need to offer similar to our pet dependents. Otherwise, their quality of life suddenly crashes around them just as their stress levels soar.

In looking for suitable environments for a rescued home-alone pet, my practice was alerted to a programme run by an organisation called Paws and Recover, which seemed a perfect fit for our initiative. Paws and Recover is a registered not-for-profit organisation establishing an infrastructure of volunteers to support people by sharing the care of their pets during a health crisis and difficult times. Through a network of volunteers, Paws and Recover offers practical help such as dog walking, respite pet care, fostering, dog and cat grooming, transporting pets to vets and providing support in assisting people in care with their animals during times of illness. The aim is to offer an alternative to rehoming, abandoning, neglecting or destroying a pet during their owner's period of ill health.

Pets are important for our mental health and well-being. For anyone who suffers from mental illness and stress, to know their pet has somewhere safe to go while they themselves recover from a period of emotional/mental/physical/financial stress must surely be a positive – with benefits for the mental health of both pet and owner.

If similar organisations exist in Ireland then it would be helpful for veterinary organisations to help raise awareness of the assistance such groups can offer in these stressful situations.

## Reader Questions and Answers

**1. HOW MIGHT AN INDIVIDUAL VETERINARY CLINIC DRAW ATTENTION TO THE CONCERNS RE A HOME-ALONE PET?**

- A.** Lobby traditional local media sources to highlight both the situation and the means to address it
- B.** Use social media posts to promote the issue amongst a different demographic
- C.** Display home-alone pet posters at veterinary clinics and provide alert cards to owners etc
- D.** All of the above

**2. HOW MIGHT THE WIDER VETERINARY PROFESSION SEEK TO FIND WAYS TO PREVENT THE ISSUE OF THE LOCKED-IN, HOME-ALONE PET FROM OCCURRING?**

- A.** Work with other professions that support medical response teams in order to implement easy and fast solutions to address the abandoned home-alone pet situation the paramedics may have to deal with
- B.** Work with animal charities and rescue groups to find ways to coordinate the groups' involvement in the home-alone pet situation
- C.** A+B
- D.** None of the above

**3. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS NOT CORRECT FOR THE SOLE OWNER OF A PET TO CONSIDER DOING?**

- A.** Where such a card system has been established, carry an up-to-date home-alone pet alert card discretely in their wallet and on their phone
- B.** Ensure, in the case of an emergency that medical and animal welfare personnel can gain a calm, keyed entry into the property
- C.** Ensure that friends/family/support organisations are aware of your wishes in the event that an emergency leaves your pets unattended at your property
- D.** Failing to do any of the above

**4. ONCE A HEALTHY PET HAS BEEN RESCUED, SELECT THE LEAST STRESSFUL PLACES TO WHICH THE PET SHOULD BE RELOCATED:**

- A.** Local vet hospital
- B.** SPCA or commercial boarding kennels
- C.** Foster societies that can place the pet in similar surroundings to its normal home
- D.** With familiar relatives or neighbours

**ANSWERS:** 1D; 2C; 3D; 4C and D.