

## Health care goes to dogs

Institute helps strength bond between vets, clients, pets QA &



Jane Shaw, director of the Argus Institute, sits Tuesday with her dog, Cliff, in the comfort room at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Fort Collins. (Miranda Grubbs/The Coloradoan)

Question: The Argus Institute is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Briefly describe the institute's mission and how it is funded.

Answer: Our two main goals are to strengthen veterinarian-client-patient communication and to support relationships between people and their companion animals. We do this through four main efforts. We support people who are facing challenging decisions surrounding their pet's health care; teach compassionate communication to veterinary professionals; research veterinarian-client-patient communication and provide community services through our Pet Hospice Program and Human Animal Bond Club. The program is funded by the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, foundation grants and private donations.

Q: Why and how did the institute decide to focus on communication and a pet's end-of-life issues?

A: Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Stephen Withrow, director of the Animal Cancer Center, saw that people whose animals have cancer need more than medical treatment. He founded the client support service. As part of the medical team, Argus counselors help clients make decisions about their pet's care. We provide emotional support, surgery updates and grief counseling, discuss end-of-life issues and advocate for client and pet needs.

Q: The institute is teaching veterinarians how to be good communicators. Why is that so important? How do patients, families and the veterinarian all benefit?

A: How veterinarians communicate with clients affects patient care, client satisfaction and whether the client follows veterinary recommendations. Proper communication is integral to correct administration of medications, home care and follow-up examinations. Compassionate communication is essential to strong

veterinarian-client-patient relationships. One of the greatest joys of being a veterinarian is building a special connection with families and their pets.

Q: Pets are an emotional and financial investment. How do you know when you're ready to own an animal? Are veterinarians open to discussing these issues with potential pet owners before they become clients?

A: Veterinarians welcome speaking with you about adopting a pet. There are many factors to consider, such as what kind of pet is most suitable for my family, household and lifestyle, what kind of care will my pet need, and how can I ensure that I can provide emotionally and financially for my pet. Having this conversation provides you with solid information to make a good decision and builds a relationship with your veterinarian.

Q: Pets provide unconditional love. How, physiologically speaking, do our pets help us deal with stressful times like these?

A: The unconditional love of a pet lowers our blood pressure, heart rates and anxiety levels and improves well-being and overall emotional health. Pets get us outside and on walks, so we reap the therapeutic qualities of exercise, fresh air, sunlight — and they motivate us to do it all again. Pets also promote interactions with others — everyone likes to share stories about their pet. Pets offer social support during stressful situations through companionship and affection — they are great listeners. Loving a pet may result in fewer doctor visits and lower health-care costs.

Q: I just read "Marley & Me," and can't bear to think of when I may have to say goodbye to one of my dogs. How will I know when it is time to say goodbye?

A: It is difficult to consider saying goodbye, and choosing to euthanize a pet is one of the hardest decisions. We encourage families to focus on the pet's quality of life by considering a few lists. What brings enjoyment to your pet's life? It may be greeting you at the door, chasing a ball, playing with a favorite toy, interacting with family and special rituals. Also, consider your pet's ability to do basic activities of eating, drinking and going to the bathroom on their own. Some families also note their pet's personality characteristics such as excited, proud, happy or playful.

When these behaviors diminish, such lists can help you assess your pet's quality of life. Spend time with your pet, discuss changes with others and speak with your veterinarian to help determine when it's time to say goodbye.

Q: Fort Collins has a plethora of veterinarians, many of whom came to CSU and stayed. What questions should pet owners ask when searching for a new vet?

A: Ask your friends, family and neighbors about their veterinarian and solicit recommendations. Schedule an initial visit at the practice to meet the veterinarians and staff, see how they interact with you and your pet and tour the hospital. This will give you a good idea of the professionalism of the staff, the atmosphere and the quality of the facilities. You could ask the veterinarian:

> What do you love about being a veterinarian?

> What is your practice philosophy in serving families and their pets?

> What is most important to you in how we work together?

> What special services do you offer, such as emergency care, boarding, home visits or financial support?

Q: These are difficult issues you deal with every day. How do you unwind?

A: My greatest source of stress relief and time for reflection are my daily walks with my dog, Cliff. I also commit to Pilates at a local studio twice weekly and find the mind-body work to be helpful in releasing tension.

Q: What's one thing most people don't know about you?

A: My grandmother was in the Wendy's "Where's the Beef?" commercial. My grandmother did not say "Where's the beef?," however, she held up the large bun to her ear and stated, "It certainly is a big bun." I was in high school when the commercial was released and could not walk down the hallway without someone yelling out, "Where's the beef?"