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Minding your pet will keep you happy, healthy and wise

UNDER THE LAW, pet owners are endowed with many rights. But we have legal responsibilities, too. These include providing adequate food, shelter, exercise, and preventive health measures for the animal. Some laws are known as social responsibilities, and include compliance with local and state public health, animal control, and animal cruelty laws (such as leash laws and requirements to clean up after your pet). Proper licensing and identification are also important obligations of ownership. Spaying or neutering your pet is a very important social responsibility that should not be overlooked.

Pet law is a serious and growing branch of the profession. It covers a broad range of legal issues, from the obvious (animal attacks and abuse) to the ambiguous (excessive noise and breeder grievances).

Any pet owner can find himself as a plaintiff or defendant in a legal dispute, and due process can be complex, lengthy, and expensive.

You have wide-ranging rights in matters such as negligent or intentional injury to your pet, so find specialized counsel with experience in animal law to represent you.

Rabies

What you need to know about rabies is this: if untreated, it's fatal. One hundred percent fatal in pets and in humans.

This deadly disease is transmitted from wild animals to domestic animals. Unvaccinated pets and livestock can, in turn, expose people. Rabies is a year-round threat, and vaccinating companion animals is the best way to prevent endangering pets and pet owners.

In California, rabies shots are required for dogs by the age of 4 months.

A pet that bites a person must be observed in confinement for 10 days to certify that it hasn't transmitted rabies. Unvaccinated pets are confined at the owner's expense.

A pet that has been exposed to rabies from wildlife and is not up-to-date on its immunizations will be promptly euthanized or quarantined for six months. A vaccinated pet is given a booster shot.

It's imperative for the protection of your pet and your family that you take rabies regulations seriously.

Travels with Charley

Legal restrictions make it a challenge to take your pet abroad, but it's not impossible. The key is

to do your homework and plan well in advance.

Your first step is to request information from the consulate office of the country (or countries) to which you will be traveling. Do this well in advance, because the response may take a long time to arrive. See your veterinarian for a checkup, make sure all vaccinations (including rabies) are current, and get a health certificate dated within 10 days of departure.

Federal regulations require that pets be at least 8 weeks old and weaned at least five days before flying. Approved transport crates are available from most major airlines or pet shops. Purchase one ahead of time to get your pet acclimated to the crate before you leave.

If your pet is not small enough to take with you in the passenger section of the plane, most humane organizations recommend that companion animals do not fly at all. Many pets that have had to travel in the airplane cargo hold have not survived the trip.

If you don't absolutely have to take your pet abroad, it is probably better not to.

Before you travel overseas, visit the web sites of your airline(s), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (<http://www.nal.usda.gov>), and the International Air Transport Association (<http://www.iata.org>).

Gorillas in the mist

You're familiar with the old gag, "Where does an 800-pound gorilla sleep? Anywhere he wants!"

That may not be so in your community. If you're thinking of getting a large or unusual animal, hunt down the local laws to determine if that animal is legal where you live.

Begin with city or county statutes and contact your Animal Services department or veterinarian.

Safety is an obvious reason for strict enforcement of these ordinances, but they exist to protect the animals as well. Consider whether your ownership of an exotic pet is the most humane alternative.

A matter of trust

You've seen movies in which the eccentric lady leaves all her money to her cat. Well, it doesn't quite work that way. For one thing, traditional wills must go through probate, which could take months or, if contested, years.

What's Fluffy to do in the meantime?

More to the point, pets are property, and you can't name property as a beneficiary.

What you can do is set up a trust. An Irrevocable Inter Vivos trust immediately transfers both the dog and the designated funds into the trust.

It also outlines your specific wishes and instructions.

You appoint a caretaker, who in turn is overseen by a trustee. Together, they become responsible for the pet's welfare.

The Humane Society of the United States offers a free information kit, "Providing for Your Pets Future Without You," available at pfpf@hsus.org.

Fasten your seatbelt!

Your pet is just like your child, and your child always wears a seat belt, right? Of course. So it is also important your pooch gets buckled in, or harnessed in as the case may be.

It's not illegal if they don't. But this isn't about what's legal; it's about what's sensible.

Unlike the laws of government, the laws of inertia don't distinguish between people and pets.

A dog flying through the interior of a car moments after an impact will be hurt the same as an unbelted passenger. A pet in an unsecured crate won't fare much better.

Practical restraints are widely available and don't compromise your pet's comfort or freedom any more than necessary.

These are generally harnesses go around the dog's chest and attach to the car seat belt. Car seats specially designed for smaller pets are also available, as are secure gates, nets, and special attachments for truck beds.

The safest place for your pet is in the rear seat. One reason is to limit driver distractions, which have been shown to cause more injuries than cell phone use. Animals that are allowed to stick their heads out of windows are cruisin' for a bruisin', and potentially serious eye injuries.

Cities and states are slowly passing legislation intended to ensure pet safety. Should you wait until it becomes mandatory?

Look at your own pet. The answer's right in front of you.

Dr. Franklin Utchen, DVM, operates the **Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center**.

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