

The Why Behind Our Dog Care Choices

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1. Background

In Australia, pets outnumber people, with an estimated 28 million pet animals. There are almost 6.5 million pet dogs in Australia with just over 47% of households in having a dog (1). Statistics are comparable worldwide. In the United States, approximately 65 million households own at least one dog, (2), with similarly high levels of dog guardianship reported in the United Kingdom and Canada (3,4).

The proportion of Australia's population aged over 65 has been increasing steadily over the last few decades. There were 4.4 million Australians aged over 65 in 2021, making up 17.4% of the population. This is projected to further increase to 22.4% of the population by 2061 (5). Again, this trend is global, with the global population over 65 projected to increase from its current 10% to 16% by 2050 (6). Older adults who care for dogs may face the amplification of specific challenges, such as limited financial resources for routine veterinary care, medication, and daily supplies due to living on a fixed income (7). Additionally, physical limitations and cognitive decline may make routine pet care tasks difficult and increase the risk of negative outcomes such as falls (8). This can lead to compromise in the dog's welfare and harm to the guardian's wellbeing.

Optimising one's dog's welfare is a fundamental component of responsible pet guardianship. Identifying the factors that may be impacting the welfare of dogs living with older adults, and greater comprehension of the benefits and challenges felt by the guardian, is essential for strengthening the dog-guardian bond and enhancing the quality of care provided to companion dogs.

This presentation draws on two qualitative research papers aimed at improving dog welfare and understanding the experiences of older adult dog guardians. The aims were: 1) investigate the factors that influence older guardian's intentions to provide the Five Domains of animal welfare for their dogs. 2) Investigate the lived experience of older adult dog guardians living with their dogs, including under-reported benefits, challenges, and anticipated future support needed.

2. Using the Five Domains and Theory of Planned Behaviour to Understand Welfare in Dogs Living with Older Adults

This first study utilised qualitative interviews and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (9) to determine what factors influence older adult guardians' intentions to provide the Five Domains of animal welfare (10) for their dogs.

Semi-structured interviews based on the Five Domains of animal welfare took place in the homes of 13 older adult (>65yo) dog guardians. Interviews were transcribed and themes identified deductively. Application of the TPB (attitudes, subjective norms and perceived

behavioural control) allowed the identification of factors influencing older adult's welfare-related behavioural intentions for each domain.

The main themes applying to multiple domains were guardians' attitudes of going above and beyond for one's dogs' welfare, which highlighted the attitude of dogs being more than just a pet, as well as a recognition of the importance of encouraging a sense of agency in dogs. These themes, spanned across the Nutrition, Physical Environment, Health, and Behavioural Interactions Domains (e.g. *"She is eating food from the gourmet pet butcher, and we eat stuff from Aldi!"*). Themes under social norms emphasised the different avenues that dog guardians receive sometimes conflicting welfare-related information. Themes involving perceived behavioural control, related to barriers and enablers for optimal welfare, including financial impacts, effects of the guardian's age, and having an appropriate home environment. The guardian's knowledge and self-efficacy was also a major theme, affecting dog welfare in both positive and negative aspects. Many themes were likely not to be exclusive to older guardians and may be reflected in a younger population. Older guardians did however, face specific challenges, particularly in their perceived behavioural control, often where age-related limitations played a critical role (e.g. *"It's actually very physically difficult for me to walk her because of arthritis in my knees."*).

3. Filling the Void: Exploring the Under-reported Benefits, Challenges, and Future Needs of Older Dog Guardians

Utilising the same sample mentioned above, this chapter now focused on the human side of the dog-guardian relationship. Investigating the lived experience of older adult dog guardians living with their dogs, including under-reported benefits, challenges, and anticipated future support needed.

Our key finding highlighted that the role of a companion dog differs depending on the health of the guardian within older age. Healthy or physically fit older adults making the transition into retirement experience different benefits and challenges from their canine companions than those in advanced old age or with age related health decline. For newly retired guardians, dogs provided a sense of structure and self-worth. For guardians entering their final stages of life, a companion dog was a critical final friendship and a reason to get up in the morning. The challenges of the dog-guardian relationship also changed with life stage, increasing drastically as age related health decline increased, highlighting the differing levels of assistance older adults may require at different life stages.

4. Conclusions

These qualitative studies provide important groundwork for improving dog welfare, through greater understanding of the factors which inform guardian decision making and behaviour. Guardian's welfare related behavioural intentions are complex, value-driven, and shaped by past experiences, attitudes, and emotions. Our approach went beyond a traditional checklist-based assessment, offering deeper insight into the motivations behind guardian welfare behaviours. It also emphasised the role of companion dogs in the lives of older adults, highlighting both the benefits and challenges across different stages of older adulthood, stressing the need for supportive measures that enable older guardians to

continue experiencing the benefits of dog guardianship, without compromising either their own wellbeing or that of their dogs.

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