

Online information for older people and their families about pet-friendly policies in care homes is limited

“He means the world to me”: Understanding pet-friendly policies in care homes

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INTRODUCTION

- Companion animals (or “pets”) are important to many people. Previous research has highlighted potential wellbeing benefits arising from contact with animals for care home residents, such as reduction in loneliness and alleviation of dementia symptoms (Banks and Banks, 2002; Yakimicki et al, 2019). However, studies have often failed to distinguish between interventions involving a visiting animal, and the emotional tie an individual may have to their own companion animal. In practice, older people and their families often have difficulty in locating a care home that will permit pets (McNicholas, 2007, Fossey and Lawrence, 2013, Blue Cross, 2018).
- Independent Age (2016) reported that people looking for information on care homes would be likely to turn to internet search engines, their local authority, the CQC and the NHS. 20% had no idea where to access information.
- Focusing upon Merseyside and Lincolnshire, we sought to identify what proportion of care homes were “pet-friendly” and what pet-friendly policies meant in practice, using publicly accessible online information.

METHODS

NHS, local authority and CQC listings did not consistently record whether a care home had a pet policy. We used a third party care home review site (carehome.co.uk) to identify care homes that had listed themselves as pet-friendly. For each of these self-reported pet-friendly care homes, we visited the care home websites, read CQC reports, and performed online searches to identify and analyse information on what being “pet-friendly” meant in practice.

RESULTS

- In total, 248 nursing and residential care homes for older people in the two areas described themselves as “pet-friendly” on a third party review site (43% of homes listed). However, only 46 (18.5%) had any kind of stated policy towards personal pets on their own website, and these were often brief and negative in tone. Some “pet-friendly” care homes stated that they only permitted fish or birds.
- Two-thirds of the care homes with a stated policy permitting pets belonged to three groups.
- CQC reports did not consistently comment on pets or pet policies. However, when CQC reports did refer to pets living on the premises, these were generally positive in tone.

DISCUSSION

- Care homes and the CQC often acknowledged that contact with animals could be beneficial for older people living in care homes. However, this typically did not translate to care homes having clearly stated policies regarding individuals’ own, personal pets.
- Our initial findings suggest that would be difficult for older people or their families to use online information to identify a care home in their area that would accept common domestic pets. This occurs in a broader context of older people and their relatives sometimes feeling that information and choice is limited when choosing a care home. (Independent Age, 2016; Competition and Market Authority, 2017)

NEXT STEPS

We plan to interview older people, their families, and care home and charity professionals about their experiences of “pet-friendly” and “no pet” policies in care homes. We will combine this with a review of the legal and sociological literature explore the emotional, legal and human rights implications of policies that do and do not permit older people to live with pets in residential care. We will also consider potential practical challenges in accommodating pets in care homes, and ways in which these can potentially be addressed.

BOB AND DARCIÉ

The title of this project comes from the case of Bob and Darcie, which was widely reported in the media. The care home where Bob and his dog Darcie had been living for 4 years told Bob that Darcie was no longer allowed to remain, and Bob would either have to leave or surrender his dog. Public crowdfunding allowed Bob and Darcie to move into alternative accommodation. This case highlights that even where pets have been permitted, care home residents do not necessarily have strong protections if policies or other circumstances change (Fox and Ray, forthcoming).

BEST INTERESTS

In the court case “Mrs P v Rochdale Borough Council & Anor” 2016, a judge concluded that facilitating contact between Mrs P and her dog Bobby was an important consideration in assessing her legal best interests. This potentially has wider implications for how relationships with pets should be assessed in planning the care of older people (Fox and Ray, forthcoming).

NEED ADVICE OR SUPPORT?

The Blue Cross offers guidance for care homes on writing “pet-friendly policies”. Its Pet Bereavement helpline can support people who have lost or been separated from a pet, whether due to entering a care home or for other reasons. The Cinnamon Trust is a national charity for older people and their pets, and operates its own voluntary register of pet-friendly care homes.

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