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Recitations relate to pet care

Many Ashlanders know and remember my father, Jack E. Irvine, M.D., for the generations of service he provided as a family doctor in our town. Of course, he is still living in Ashland; he is keeping himself busy outside the offices of medicine with friends, family and his gardens. My father described to my siblings and me about his experience being a young boy during "The Great Depression." Now, during the hard economic times that society has been and still is facing, I cannot keep myself from thinking of him and of some of his stories. Though interesting, these stories are greatly shadowed by my memory of his repeated recitations of several sayings. In this present challenging time, perhaps the sayings my father shared with me will help you to keep your pets healthy despite the present economic woes.

I also would like to encourage you to submit your own pet health questions so this column will truly be directed to our readers' interests as it is intended.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

In my clinical experience, the most common and costly diseases for pets are associated with obesity, internal and external parasitism and many dental diseases. Yet, much of this disease is entirely preventable. Obesity is associated with a myriad of risks including diabetes in cats, degenerative joint disease and arthritis, skin infections, inactivity and malaise, increased cancer risk, pancreatitis and increased difficulty in examination and anesthesia. Avoiding and correcting obesity cannot be overemphasized. Guidelines for proper diet and exercise and strategies to assist safe weight loss are available from your veterinarian.

Common skin parasites and intestinal parasites and the diseases they cause in pets are easily prevented. Prevention of parasites extends to greater safety for your family as many common parasites (fleas, ticks, roundworms and hookworms) also transmit or cause horribly debilitating diseases in people.

Contrary to popular jest, dogs do not have bad breath normally and cats are experts at keeping their mouth disease hidden from view. Dental disease is practically guaranteed if an effort is not made to control plaque bacteria and calculus formation on teeth. That needed control may take some time and may take some expense. One method does not fit all, so it makes sense to consult with your veterinarian to make sure your efforts will have the desired effects. The benefits of avoiding preventable disease include reduced monetary expense, reduced pain and illness and reduced emotional distress.

Another of my father's recitations was "Wash it well with soap and water."

Keeping the body clean and dry is certainly a good means of preventing many troubles. With pets, this is not as easy as washing one's hands well; it might involve regular baths or grooming with hair trimming to prevent mats. My rule of thumb is simply that if you pet your dog and detect any odor or feel your hands need washed, then your pet is overdue for a bath. Different skin types require different bathing frequencies and different shampoos to maximize benefits. I commonly see patients with itchy dermatitis under matted hair, especially fungal and bacterial infections of the perineal skin where mats cover the exit ports for urine or stool. The number one cause for mats on a cat is obesity. The mats form over the back and rear legs where the overweight cat is unable to reach. Inadequate combing of thick coats and, sometimes, poor health also contribute to matting in both dogs and cats.

Finally, my favorite, "If it is worth doing, it is worth doing well."

When presenting your pet for a physical examination, take full advantage of the information being offered to you. It is intended to solve problems and help keep your pet healthy. Ask questions and think forward about how to prevent problems that could arise with the next coming season, holiday or age stage. When advice does not seem to fit your own situation, ask about that. Your veterinarian is likely to understand you better and to be able to offer a more fitting recommendation. Some of us like to work through life's puzzles on our own, we are DIY'ers. I accept that label myself, and there have been times when it has cost me. Especially in times of economic strain, seeking advice from a local expert just might save quite a few dollars of cure.