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In industrialized societies, more than 1 in 3 dogs and people currently qualify as overweight or obese. Experts in public health expect both these figures to rise. Although clinical treatment remains important, so are public perceptions and social norms. This article presents a thematic analysis of English-language mass media coverage on canine obesity from 2000 through 2009 and compares these results with a thematic analysis of articles on canine obesity in leading veterinary journals during the same time period. Drawing on Giddens’s theory of structuration, this study identified articles that emphasized individual agency, environmental structure, or both as contributors to canine obesity. Comparisons with weight-related health problems in human populations were virtually absent from the veterinary sample. Although such comparisons were almost always present in the media sample, quotations from veterinarians and other spokespeople for the welfare of nonhuman animals emphasized the agency of individual caregivers (owners).
Canine obesity is an emerging and complex problem facing companion nonhuman animal caregivers (owners) and health care providers in many cosmopolitan societies. By definition, obesity occurs when a dog is at least 15% over the dog’s ideal weight; less well defined, a dog is generally considered overweight when the dog is 10–15% heavier than the ideal. It is estimated that 20–40% of companion dogs in Britain, Australia, and North America are overweight or obese (Lund, Armstrong, Kirk, & Klausner, 2006; McGreevy et al., 2005). The underlying cause of weight gain and obesity in dogs who are companion animals is most often described as a positive mismatch between energy intakes in the form of food and energy outputs determined by the duration and intensity of exercise (Burkholder & Toll, 2000). The occurrence of obesity in dogs is a veterinary medical and welfare concern because it is a health risk for other chronic diseases such as diabetes, osteoarthritis, heart failure, cancer, and the quality of life as well as longevity of the affected animal (German, 2006; Laflamme, 2006).

Anything that lowers a dog’s metabolic rate (increasing age, neutering status, or underlying disease) will increase a dog’s risk of developing obesity, as do certain breed-related genetic predispositions (Labradors and cocker spaniels). Although what can loosely be described as endogenous biological factors are important, there is clear evidence that obesity in dogs is also affected by the caregiver’s food management strategies, exercise levels, and other socially mediated factors (Bland, Guthrie-Jones, Taylor, & Hill, 2009). The risks described earlier are mediated through their combined effects on the animal’s basal metabolic rate, food-seeking behavior, and levels of physical activity. Consequently, current conceptions of this condition treat the owner as an intervening variable in the balance between dietary intake and the energy expenditure. Owners typically determine the amount of calories consumed; owners’ choices and capacities can promote more or less physical activity through walking or playing with their animals. Therefore, types of owners can promote lifestyles that increase the risks of canine obesity. The epidemiological profiles of typical owners of at-risk dogs are as follows: overweight themselves, individuals on lower incomes, and older people who are relatively inactive and spend much more time in the company of their pets (Courcier, Thomson, Mellor, & Yam, 2010; Kienzle, Bergler, & Mandernach, 1998).

From this perspective, dogs at risk of obesity are those whose owners provide too much food, too little opportunity for exercise, or both. Treatment strategies
have tended to emphasize only one of these factors. Dietary therapy is considered the “cornerstone to weight management in dogs” (German, 2006, p. 19). Any number of specialized diets have been developed and marketed as the frontline treatment for pet obesity problems. These diets typically aim to restrict calories while still permitting satiation, thereby minimizing the potential for unwanted begging and food-seeking behaviors. Trials suggest that dietary restriction takes much longer to work in owned animals than in experimental studies (German, Holden, Bissot, Hackett, & Biourge, 2007). Poor dietary compliance through continued overfeeding has consistently been identified as the most likely reason for slow weight loss, leading to owner frustration and eventual treatment failure (Laflamme, 1995; Rohlf, Toukhatsi, Coleman, & Bennett, 2010). It has been suggested that overfeeding occurs for various reasons including the owner’s inattention to the calorie content of the diet, attempts to control a dog’s scavenging behavior, misplaced generosity, or an explicit nurture of feelings of love between owners and their animals (Kienzle et al., 1998; McGreevy et al., 2005).

Veterinarians and animal welfare agencies find the most difficult problem to tackle in formulating their approach to canine obesity is the behavior of the owner (Bland, Guthrie-Jones, Taylor, & Hill, 2010; Morris, 2009). Veterinarians often report that significant numbers of their clients do not recognize that their animal is overweight or their contribution to the problem. Of those who do, many individuals and families find it difficult to adopt appropriate patterns of feeding and exercise behavior in the longer term. Although owner education is seen as critical to combating this problem, there has also been a concerted campaign to educate veterinarians as to how to diagnose the condition, understand the health risks, and communicate this information as part of effective monitoring and treatment strategies. Based on current estimates, the incidence of this condition will continue to rise, prompting a concerted campaign to raise awareness about the causes and consequences of obesity in companion animal populations and about effective strategies for treating canine patients (German & Morgan, 2008). This information has been disseminated through two channels. Veterinarians have been informed of research results through professional publications, and owners have been targeted through the propagation of these findings through newspapers and other mass media.

Media coverage reflects, amplifies, and can also inform public perceptions and social norms (Oliver & Lee, 2005; Saguy & Almeling, 2008). Public health professionals and researchers have sought to harness the media influences on public perceptions and social norms through media campaigns and media advocacy (Kline, 2006; Wallack & Dorfman, 1996). By serving as credible sources in media coverage, health professionals serve as role models and public educators (Chapman, 2004). Perhaps because health care professionals identify with credible spokespeople in media coverage of health issues, media coverage
has also been demonstrated to influence practices such as prescribing patterns (Maclure et al., 1998). In other words, the influences on practicing professionals include their initial training; continuing professional education activities, such as conferences and journal clubs; outreach by industry representatives; and mass media coverage. By influencing the knowledge and views of veterinary professionals in clinical practice and in the role of an expert media source, publications in leading veterinary journals on the subject of overweight dogs may also play a vitally important—albeit indirect—role in public education. Although there are only a handful of studies that examine the effectiveness of veterinary public health media campaigns (these focus on rabies prevention), we can safely assume that veterinary publications and representations in the media may influence public perceptions in ways that matter for both human and animal health.

The main purpose of this study is to invite further consideration of veterinary and animal welfare professionals as public educators in relation to the societal and cultural dimensions of weight gain and obesity. There is a substantial corpus of research on the impact of expert and media representations of the causes, consequences, and meaning of obesity in human populations and their influence on the popularity of different types of intervention (Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009; Evans, Finkelstein, Kamerow, & Renaud, 2005). In essence, these forms or modes of intervention occur on a continuum. At one end, attempts to curb obesity focus on individual owners; for example, publicity campaigns have been designed to encourage people to exercise regularly. At the other end of this continuum are measures that focus on changing environmental attributes. Measures to increase the walkability of a residential neighborhood are an example of a structural intervention to prevent and curb obesity. Between them are mixtures of both intervention types. By framing this continuum with reference to Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration, we can describe “agency” as a function of an individual’s capacity to make choices about his or her actions or behavior and “structure” as the social and physical environment that constrains the actions of individuals. It is important to remember that agency and structure interact. For our purposes, the salient insight is that agency and structure both give rise to sets of social practices and thereby shape the world we inhabit. Now that companion animals tend to be considered full-fledged family members while also continuing to serve as familiar referents in popular culture, media portrayals of overweight dogs stand to exert considerable influence on how citizens view this animal welfare concern and related issues in human populations. Educating the public has long been a preoccupation for animal welfare advocates. It is our position that in the contemporary period, it is becoming an increasingly important role for veterinarians in companion animal practice as well as for animal welfare societies.
MATERIALS AND METHODS

To identify media coverage on canine obesity, the database “Newspaper Source” (EBSCO) was searched using the following terms as text words: (overweight or obese* or fat) and (dog* or canine* or pet*) for the period January 1, 2000 through December 31, 2009, identifying and downloading 435 full text of items. 

Newspaper Source is a database that catalogs and archives the contents of many major and regional newspapers in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These include USA Today, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Toronto Star (Canada), The Times (United Kingdom), Daily Mail (United Kingdom), and The Australian. Pretesting confirmed that this search strategy would produce a larger and more heterogeneous sample of news reports while still including all the coverage that focused more narrowly on obesity. Duplicate articles and those that were not immediately relevant to canine obesity were discarded, after which 219 unique articles remained to be analyzed.

The media sample was then read, cataloged manually, reread several times, and compared by the lead author—both chronologically and across the corpus—in order to distill the meanings and messages promulgated by the media coverage of canine obesity and to track prominent concepts, differences, and themes (Bryman, 2001). Next, a keyword search was undertaken of the media corpus to confirm and to extend the preliminary thematic analysis, using the following pairs of terms: “diet” or “eat,” “control” or “treat,” “walk” or “exercise,” and “lifestyle” or “environment.” The results from keyword searching were then tabulated in matrix form and displayed visually as descriptive statistics in charts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Regular discussions among the authors served to generate additional inquiries and to validate insights as they emerged (Stewart, 1998). This approach is consistent with ethnographic content analysis (ECA), which is a qualitative research method for interpreting documents in context (Krippendorff, 2004). Drawing on both numerical and narrative data, ECA involves constant comparison and enables researchers to generate insights about how documents promote particular ways of understanding, interpreting, and responding to an issue or event (Altheide, 1987).

The media analysis revealed a prominent role for veterinary research in establishing canine obesity as a newsworthy topic; thus, the study was extended to veterinary publications. The key database for veterinary publications, C.A.B. Abstracts (OVID), was searched with a more sensitive strategy, using the following subject headings/thesaurus terms: (adipose tissue or body fat or body mass index or obesity or overfeeding or overweight or weight control or weight gain or weight reduction) and dogs. Results were limited to articles published in English between January 2000 and December 2009. A total of 301 records were retrieved. The search was then refined by restricting the data set to publications in 12 high-impact veterinary journals: the Journal of the American Veterinary Association,
the Australian Veterinary Journal, the American Journal of Veterinary Research, In Practice (United Kingdom), the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, the Journal of Veterinary Pharmacology and Therapeutics, Veterinary Clinics of North America (United States), Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association, Preventive Veterinary Medicine, Journal of Small Animal Practice, The Veterinary Times (United Kingdom), and The Veterinary Record (United Kingdom). These journals were selected because of their relative prestige, wide readership, or both among companion animal practitioners in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Duplicate and nonrelevant materials were removed manually, which left 76 articles to be analyzed. Following the same analytic procedures and approach described earlier for the media analysis, the veterinary articles were then examined, coded, and subdivided on the basis of the primary thematic focus into the following categories: diet, health risks, exercise, veterinary contributions, owner contributions, and obesity as a secondary factor in another disease. A keyword search of the veterinary professional publications was then conducted, using the pairs of search terms derived from the media analysis. After that, the veterinary thematic analysis was compared with the media thematic analysis.

RESULTS

By 2009, weight gain and obesity in dogs had become a prominent animal welfare concern both in the popular media and in leading veterinary journals. Even in satirical commentaries published in the mass media, the overall tone of the coverage was sympathetic to animal welfare. The topic appears to be firmly lodged by 2009; the phenomenon of overweight and obese dogs was no longer presented to readers of veterinary journals or to members of the public as “breaking news” but as a perennial problem. In keeping with our approach to these materials we present our analysis of the media coverage before turning to our analysis of the professional literature. Notwithstanding the importance of peer-reviewed knowledge to veterinary perceptions of the causes, consequences, and meaning of canine obesity—and thus how they communicate with clients and how journalists construe and explain the issue—media coverage is the most publicly visible portrayal of how animal owners should understand the problem and its likely solutions.

Thematic Analysis of Media Coverage on Overweight Dogs

Media interest in canine obesity is part of a larger story about a global obesity “epidemic” affecting human populations and, by extension, their companion animals. Consequently, human comparisons are common currency in newspaper
articles. The coincident and increasing rate of obesity in human populations is almost always mentioned early on to describe and characterize the problem. A typical example appeared in *The Toronto Star* in 2003: “The old wives’ tale holds that people start to look like their pets. Turns out it’s the other way around: North America’s pets are starting to look like their owners—overweight” (Schmid, 2003, p. L06).

Once the connection has been suggested, the media report usually introduces a professional voice, typically a veterinarian, to describe the associated risks to canine health and what this phenomenon means for pet owners. Most newspaper articles mention at least two issues that are thought to be central to the problem. As our choice of keyword pairs suggests, most prominent are concerns surrounding the diet and opportunities for physical activity people provide for their pet animals and how these two factors are shaped by their relationship and shared lifestyle.

Each of the thematically paired terms also represent a set of descriptors that point to specific causes of, and remedies for, canine obesity. Notably each causal theme can also be broken down into agentic and structural elements. For example, “diet” and “eat” refer to the quantity and content of foodstuffs available to the animal, both as a cause and a potential remedy. Owners have agency over the type and amount of food their dogs eat; however, the nutritional composition of the diet is part of the structure that shapes the effects these choices have on the animal. Buying the appropriate type of food for your dog is not the same as also restricting the amount fed to ensure the animal does not receive more calories than needed. Similarly, terms such as “walk” and “exercise” are interchangeable and can be seen to represent or encode broad concern with levels of physical activity, whereas the terms “lifestyle” and “environment” broadly signify that the owner’s social context or daily routines somehow factor into a dog becoming overweight. Acknowledging that the dog also has agency—dogs can beg for food or be frightened of walking near busy roads—in our corpus, articles that focused on human agency in owner-animal interactions included the word “control,” the word “treats,” or both (Figure 1).

By the end of the ECA phase of the analysis, it became apparent that each of these keyword pairs in our corpus was predominantly used to refer to owner agency, structural influences, or both. The themes often intersect, as would be expected for a condition as complex as canine obesity (Figure 1). Nonetheless, tabulation of these result indicated patterns in the emphasis and frequency of these themes (Figure 2). Diet was the most prominent theme; diet was mentioned in at least 73% of all news reports. Statements with a strong structural emphasis were rare and referenced personal agency as well: “The main cause is a combination of more palatable, high-calorie diets coupled with urbanisation” (Florez, 2002, p. 29). By contrast, discussions surrounding the theme of food were almost entirely about owner choices and behaviors. Exercise was also a
**FIGURE 1**  Keyword table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword Pair</th>
<th>Identified Problem</th>
<th>Agentic, Structural, or Mixed Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diet &amp; eat</td>
<td>Owners feed too much of the wrong foods</td>
<td>agentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We are not about getting people prosecuted but we are about getting the message across of the dangers and the need for vets to be vigilant about getting owners to put overweight pets on a diet” (Whitfield, 2002, p. 9).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The best solution to overweight pets and overweight pet owners is the same: Eat less and exercise more” (Editorial, 2006, p. D10).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exercise &amp; walk</td>
<td>Pet dogs do not get enough exercise</td>
<td>mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“More dogs than cats were overweight because they relied on their owners to take them out to exercise” (Utton, 2002, p. 25).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Instead of rewarding our dogs with exercise and attention, we are just throwing them treat after treat after treat . . . As a result, they are becoming seriously overweight and are reluctant to go for walks or run it off” (Sims, 2007, p. 35).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control &amp; treats</td>
<td>Owners need to be disciplined</td>
<td>agentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Best treat for pets: Restraint” (Hayes, 2007).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We control the situation,” Ward said. “Dogs and cats can’t open the refrigerator. They can’t have that midnight snack unless you provide it. But they look at us with those big doe eyes and we give in” (Morgan, 2006).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lifestyle &amp; environment</td>
<td>Owners and dogs now live in a way conducive to an imbalance between diet and exercise</td>
<td>mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Australians’ inactive lifestyle and poor diet is killing our dogs and cats, animal experts claim” (Florez, 2002, p. 29).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Dogs are increasingly exhibiting the canine equivalent of a lifestyle built on the twin pillars of home-delivered pizza and all-day Sky Sport” (Hamilton, 2004, p. 9).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

prominent theme (55%). In coverage mentioning physical activity levels, the emphasis was more likely to be mixed, reflecting both structural and antigenic influences on an owner’s capacity to exercise the animal appropriately. Notably, as the decade progresses, descriptions of the role of food and physical activity were increasingly framed by discussions about owners needing to take control...
of themselves, their living situations, and their animals’ food-seeking behaviors, thereby returning to human agency (34% of all media reports). Finally, explicit references to the role of environment and lifestyle were relatively sparse (18%). Those that were present tended to acknowledge that the other causal elements interact and focus on how modern environments influence human habits and lifestyle choices rather than canine behavior (Figure 2).

Our analysis of the media sample indicates that connections and correlations between humans and domestic animals are often used to frame stories on animal obesity; however, owner agency is emphasized, and the possible implications of this shared health risk are almost entirely unexamined. Only occasionally are structural influences such as demographic changes (more single-person households, aging), urbanization (apartment living), paid work (longer working hours, increased participation of women in the paid labor force), or sedentary pastimes of owners (television) mentioned as causal contributors to the number of overweight dogs. Crucially, responsibility for these environmental contributors is placed almost entirely on animal owners.

Thematic Analysis of Veterinary Articles on Overweight Dogs

The frequency of publications on canine obesity and weight-related issues in the veterinary professional literature shows a pattern similar to that of our press sample, with both peaking in 2007. Notably, veterinary surveys and epidemiological
reports of the increasing incidence of overweight pet dogs initiate much of the subsequent media interest in the problem. Like newspaper reports, it is rare for an article on canine obesity not to mention multiple issues (Figure 3). Nonetheless, aside from four recent review articles in our sample that focused explicitly on the everyday interconnections between these factors, the remaining 72 research studies emphasized a single, central theme. In other words, the veterinary articles in the sample were typically restricted in scope to comprehensively elucidating only one causal factor, consequence, or possible point of intervention (Figure 3).

As you might expect, articles that appeared in the peer-reviewed veterinary literature were narrower in focus and more likely to address biological rather than behavioral aspects of weight-related issues in dogs. As a “structured” discourse, the most salient difference between the professional and media samples was the meaning of the word “diet.” In the veterinary scientific literature this term is used to refer to the properties of different types of pet food instead of owners and overfeeding. Consequently, the umbrella term “dietary factors” is commonly deployed to talk about both the agentic and structural aspects of energy intake in canine obesity management. In those articles where an explicit distinction is drawn between the composition of the diet and the owner’s control over what the animal eats, terms such as “feeding management” or “dietary plans” are employed. It is also interesting to note that both veterinarians and animal welfare organizations cautioned in the news samples against the use of the new diet pills for dogs. The reason given was that such pharmaceutical fixes could mask more important animal welfare problems. In contrast, publications in the veterinary
literature were restricted to studies of safety and efficacy with intimations on how this drug might be used to initiate rapid weight loss in animals whose health and welfare precludes a traditional approach.

Despite the differences in meaning of the term “diet,” the increasing frequency of discussions about control in both the professional and media discourses indicates that individual behaviors and choices surrounding diet and exercise are strongly emphasized. Most veterinary articles implicitly identified owner behavior as both a cause of, and a solution for, overweight dogs—however, without contextualizing that behavior in terms of structural influences that might be a barrier to effective obesity management. Those who did were actually from reader-friendly publications for community-based veterinarians such as The Veterinary Times (V. Brown, 2009).

Classifying the 76 veterinary articles in our sample by central theme, we confirmed the relative inattention as to how structure might influence agency. The results shown in Figure 4 suggest the following: Apart from articles on dietary factors and comorbidities, the next most frequent type of publications are those that report on the efficacy, safety, and proper use of new drug-based interventions. Notably, the market release and promotion of the appetite-suppressing pharmaceuticals (Yartvin & Slentrol) correspond to the peak in veterinary and media article numbers in 2007 (Figures 2 and 3). Owner behaviors and veterinary roles—how veterinarians should describe, measure, and diagnose obesity—receive some explicit scholarly attention, as does the frequency with which companion animal clinicians consider the weight and bodily condition of their patients. Yet, only a small number of research publications

![Central Theme](image_url)

**FIGURE 4** Central theme of leading veterinary articles on weight gain in dogs, 2000–2009. (Color figure available online.)
focus squarely on either veterinary or owner roles \((n = 9)\). The articles that sought to accommodate—and account for—all the known factors were review articles, not empirical tests of their interactions and relative contributions in promoting canine weight gain in contemporary urban societies.

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings are hardly surprising. Past studies of how the media report on chronic disease suggest that, instead of social determinacy being central to the causal story, the problem is usually framed as one of individual discipline and compliance, which, if needed, can be aided by clinically orientated intervention (Gollust & Lantz, 2009; Kim & Willis, 2007). Consequently, media downplay the owner’s inability to change the structural and environmental issues that promote companion animal obesity: lack of time and/or space to exercise, animal bylaws, and perceptions of neighborhood safety. It is arguable that the overarching effect of continually pulling focus to the behaviors and choices of individuals is that these reports typically represent canine obesity as a simple nutritional problem caused by ignorant and irresponsible owners. An Australian veterinarian identified the rationale for this focus: “Denial in owners is a major problem. . . . Busy people, instead of taking their pets for walks, feel sorry for them and give them food . . . they think they are doing their pets a favour but in fact they’re killing them” (Walliker, 2006, p. W04).

Although the chain of events described earlier is no doubt common in veterinary experiences of the problem—and modifying owner behavior is central to any lasting solution—the causal attribution seeks only to reinforce the need for owner compliance and therefore remains relatively shallow.

Instead of recognizing that people are sometimes constricted in choices and in their capacity to change their circumstances, the message typically conveyed to the public via the media is that overweight pets are paying for the failings of individual owners. Veterinarians and animal welfare organizations consistently legitimize this message as expert resources. Implicit in this communication pattern is the claim that the only realistic solution to this social problem is individual in nature. The veterinary literature conveys a similar message. Aside from the handful of review articles, all of which appeared toward the end of the decade (Bars, 2009; V. Brown, 2009), what is perhaps most striking from our examination of the veterinary professional literature is the lack of an explicit engagement with the structural context (the lifestyle and environment) shared by both afflicted animal and owner. Moreover, these same environments underlie the major health concerns for human populations in industrialized countries worldwide.
Researchers concerned about canine obesity as an animal welfare issue have surveyed the extent of canine obesity, investigated which people are most likely to overfeed their dogs, and evaluated weight-loss programs designed for both dogs and their human companions (Kienzle et al., 1998; Kushner, Blatner, Jewell, & Rudloff, 2006; Rohlf et al., 2010). Intervention strategies that focus only on changing how individuals exercise their agency typically target only high-risk cases. Yet, as demonstrated more than 25 years ago by Rose (1985), the causes of incidence rarely mirror the causes of individual cases. In practical terms, this means that treating sick individuals does little to prevent sickness in populations. Consequently, although targeted interventions that focus on individual behavior can certainly be defended in terms of practicality and ethics, an interventionist approach that is based on the question of why overweight individuals differ from those of normal weight in the same population will differ fundamentally from an interventionist approach that is based on the question of why so many weight-related health problems are currently present in industrialized urban populations. The latter approach guides this discussion of our findings. It is based on preventing incidence—that is, paying attention to how agency and structure interact to help stem the continual creation of new high-risk cases.

Although companion animal veterinarians are beginning to consider the influence of environmental factors and formulate interventions for populations of at-risk, overweight, and obese animals (Bland et al., 2009; Bouthegourd, Kelly, Clety, Tardif, & Smeets, 2009), the vast majority of research pertaining to treatment and prevention remains focused on dietary modification, owner behavior, and drug-based interventions (Rohlf et al., 2010; Roudebush, Schoenherr, & Delaney, 2008). These are focused on agency. Furthermore, given that the effects of weight-related conditions are not limited to the highest risk members of the canine population, even modest improvements can have a greater impact on overall population health. Public perceptions and social norms regarding issues such as physical activity and nutrition appear to affect the health of both human and canine populations (S. Brown & Rhodes, 2006; Cutt, Giles-Corti, & Knuiman, 2008; Rohlf et al., 2010). Yet, interventions to shift public perceptions and social norms—and ultimately, to improve health outcomes—are unlikely to have wide-reaching effects if they exclusively target high-risk cases (Rose, 1992).

Recent studies indicate that owner income, working hours, diets, and exercise patterns all influence the risk of excess weight in pet dogs as they do in human populations (Courcier et al., 2010; Heuberger & Wakshlag, 2010; Nijland, Stam, & Seidell, 2010). All these investigations appeared in 2010. They were not, however, necessarily published in high-profile veterinary journals; thus, they were not included in our study. Overall, questions as to structural factors and social determinants of canine obesity remain unaddressed in the veterinary literature. This absence is unsurprising. Almost all veterinary research into the causes, health consequences, and treatment of canine obesity is funded by stakeholders.
such as pet food and pharmaceutical companies that have a vested interest in addressing these problems from a perspective that seeks to promote specific types of clinically focused interventions. Nonetheless, the lack of structural context in this literature has implications for how veterinary practitioners understand and respond to socially mediated health risks for chronic degenerative diseases. Leading veterinary journals have been more concerned with genetic differences between dog breeds than with the contribution of owners and veterinarians and their ability to reshape or overcome structural barriers that promote what are loosely described as “obesogenic” environments. Yet, surely the rising incidence of weight-related health problems in canine populations can be attributed to changes in the social context and physical setting in which these animals are embedded, not to genetic mutations since World War II.

Our examination of public perceptions via media coverage and veterinary publications that stand to influence veterinarians in their capacity as public educators is a unique contribution to the literature on overweight dogs. The analysis opens up many questions for further discussion and future research. In terms of research design, the main strength of the study is the emphasis on exploration (Stewart, 1998), which led inductively to linking and comparing the content of popular media with that of professional publications. The sample sizes are small and should not be seen as strictly representative; for that reason, we have limited our presentation to descriptive statistics and to inferences drawn through qualitative comparisons. The rigor and, thus, confidence in our analysis come from an in-depth examination based on immersion in the data set informed by the professional expertise of our team: the lead author spent more than 15 years in veterinary practice with companion animals in the United Kingdom and Australia. Even with small sample sizes, it is possible that our selection of materials is more influential than what might first appear to be the case. We deliberately narrowed our sample of veterinary content to articles published in journals likely to be most influential; in doing so, we deliberately included some reader-friendly publications that often recast academic research with practical application in mind. In addition, although our media analysis is based on 219 unique articles, many of these media items would have been reprinted and published many times both in print and online (with minor or no editing).

It is ironic that during the same period in which canine obesity has been established in the mass media as an animal welfare problem caused by certain types of animal owners, a growing body of literature on the health of human populations attests to the positive influence that dogs can play in facilitating regular exercise (S. Brown & Rhodes, 2006; Cutt, Giles-Corti, Knuiman, & Burke, 2007). This positive role was mentioned occasionally in our sample of media coverage on overweight dogs; however, it was not explored in any depth that went beyond relationships of individual people with individual dogs. One reason might be that the veterinary literature tends to emphasize diet over physical activity. Veterinary
practitioners may be more likely to focus—including when they are quoted in
the media—on overfeeding rather than on underexercising. There is a role for
veterinarians and animal welfare agencies in promoting structural interventions
that would complement and even synergistically enhance the efficacy of the
current focus on individual cases. Urban design that encourages walking as well
as positive feelings about their neighborhoods are among the factors that have
been shown to support moderate exercise for large numbers of people, and these
factors have a “dog angle” (Brownson, Baker, Housemann, Brennan, & Bacak,
2001; Cutt et al., 2008; Kaczynski & Henderson, 2008). Although owners are
most likely to benefit from dog-walking, there is some evidence that dog-walking
can serve as a kind of informal neighborhood patrol that augments perceptions of
safety, which may encourage nonowners to walk (Boneham & Sixsmith, 2006;
Wood et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

Overfeeding is a major problem that needs to be addressed. In addition, by focus-
ing on community engagement and encouraging participation, it is arguable that
the veterinary profession can both promote activities that provide human health
benefits and effectively stem the canine obesity problem. Examples of efforts
down this path include programs by organizations such as the Cinnamon Trust in
the United Kingdom, which, among other things, puts owners and voluntary dog-
walkers in contact with each other (www.cinnamon.org.uk). Nevertheless, it must
be noted that the influence of dogs on people’s physical activity is not uniformly
positive; for example, loose dogs appear to act as a deterrent, notably for women
in neighborhoods in North America that are predominantly Black or Hispanic
(Frank, Kerr, Rosenberg, & King, 2010; Sallis, King, Sirard, & Albright, 2007).
Moreover, to the extent that social inequality not only increasingly manifests
in weight gain in people and their dogs but also has the potential to promote
human health, attention must be paid to addressing overweight dogs as an animal
welfare concern in ways that do not further undermine the capacity of lower
income people who live in rented apartments to benefit physically, mentally, and
emotionally from canine companionship (Shore, Petersen, & Douglas, 2003).
Although caution is needed, we think that these positive connections between
human and canine health merit further examination. Moreover, animal welfare
organizations could, and therefore should, play crucial roles.

REFERENCES


