



Sara Press //

In early June, the New York City Department of Health confirmed that the first dog in the United States had tested positive for Covid-19.^[1] Few details were known about the dog beyond his location, his breed, and his prognosis—it was believed he would recover. However, on July 11th, the details of this dog's identity were released after Buddy, the seven-year-old German Shepherd from Staten Island, New York, died from complications associated with possible lymphoma.^[2] Although Buddy's death was linked to lymphoma, little is known about how underlying conditions might increase an animal's likelihood of getting sick from the coronavirus, as they have been shown to do in humans.^[3]

Public knowledge regarding Covid-19's impact on humans is expanding daily, but its effects on animals remain largely unexamined. Our knowledge is commensurate with the numbers: statistics from late July show that over four million people have been diagnosed with Covid-19 in the U.S., while fewer than 25 pets have tested positive for the virus.^[4] Although it is believed that the coronavirus originated from bats, the virus's journey to humans and other animals is subject to speculation.^[5]

When Buddy began struggling to breathe in April, his owner Robert Mahoney was alone in the belief that his dog might have the novel coronavirus.^[6] Mahoney himself had been suffering through symptoms of Covid-19 for weeks before Buddy showed signs of sickness, and he was soon convinced that he had passed the virus on to his dog. No dogs had tested positive for the coronavirus up to that point, and veterinary clinic closures and social distancing protocols made it difficult to get Buddy seen.

Buddy was finally tested in May, a month after he first started showing signs of labored breathing. The New York City Department of Health confirmed his case in early June, and his condition

worsened over the next six weeks leading up to his death. The Mahoney family is reportedly still frustrated that “health experts didn’t more closely probe possible connections between Covid and the cascading health problems” that Buddy experienced.^[7] Their frustration reveals a larger issue of health inequity in the United States and offers a unique opportunity to reflect on what kinds of life—both human and nonhuman—are prioritized in American society.

A recent article published in the *New York Times* reports that Latinx and African American residents of the U.S. are “three times as likely to become infected” with Covid-19 than their white neighbors and are “nearly twice as likely to die from the virus.”^[8] These racialized health disparities reveal a humanist hierarchy in the United States, which continues to position certain humans as *more* human than others, while often overlooking the wellbeing of nonhumans altogether. And yet, in a country rife with inequalities, it is concerning that some animals have better access to healthcare than humans, due to the economic status they share with their owners. In other words, there are animals throughout the United States who are being medically prioritized over humans because their owners can afford to pay their bills.

With millions of people confined to their homes, animal adoptions are skyrocketing and surges in emergency visits to the vet are following suit. According to Clinton Pet veterinarian Dr. Jessica Price, veterinary clinics have been experiencing a “tremendous amount” of emergencies during the pandemic, exacerbated by the need for overburdened staff to adapt to curbside service and new safety measures.^[9] Thus, while marginalized people across America struggle to receive care for Covid, rising numbers of animals are being treated for medical emergencies.

Humans around the globe have been in various stages of quarantine for up to half a year now, and increasing visits to the vet may be partly attributed to more people buying, fostering, and adopting pets. During these times of isolation and uncertainty, people are turning to animals for comfort. According to Matt Bershader, the president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, “pet fostering is through the roof.”^[10] Shelters in New York and L.A. have seen a doubling of the number of people wanting to foster dogs, Bershader reports, while animal shelters in states like North Carolina have had to stop accepting new applications for adoptions.^[11]

Animals offer wonderful companionship, and they also provide therapeutic benefits for people struggling with physical and mental illnesses.^[12] This is clearly seen in the proliferation of Animal-Assisted Therapy on college campuses since the early 2000s.^[13] Colleges across North America now welcome animals as therapeutic aids for students struggling with stress, anxiety, and depression—particularly during exam periods. A global pandemic is as good a time as any to reach out for a canine companion who might mitigate stress.

For new and seasoned owners alike, the pandemic has offered an unusual opportunity to spend more time with pets. However, the upsurge in emergency visits to the vet might also be correlated with animals’ increased proximity to human foods and activities to which they may not normally have frequent exposure. While humans may be in the same vicinity as their pets, they may not always be watching them. Many of the stresses that people are experiencing in quarantine, such as

working from home, caregiving, struggling with unemployment, and navigating unstable housing—among countless other pressures—could understandably distract animal owners. For this reason and others, veterinarians and animal rescue workers caution new owners about the many responsibilities that come with adopting pets.

Coronavirus pet adoptions are like wartime romances, Michael M. Phillips suggests, “magical in the moment but likely to fade amid the peacetime realities of day jobs, pricey dog walkers and urine-stained carpets.”^[14] Put simply, there is a permanence to these adoptions that will persist beyond the pandemic. And while it is crucial that pet owners understand the financial costs associated with animal care, it is even more urgent that American society takes ownership over the socioeconomic and medical inequities that continue to deny millions of people in the U.S. their fundamental rights to life.

Notes

[1] Daly, Natasha. “Exclusive: Buddy, first dog to test positive for COVID-19 in the U.S., has died.” *National Geographic*, July 29, 2020.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Daly.

[5] Mallapaty, Smriti. “What’s the risk that animals will spread the coronavirus?” *Nature*, June 1, 2020.

[6] Daly.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Oppel, Richard A. Jr. et al. “The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus.” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020.

[9] Krull, Melissa. “Many Veterinary Clinics are Overwhelmed During Pandemic.” *Spectrum News*, June 30, 2020.

[10] Phillips, Michael M. “Coronavirus Panic Buying: Puppies” *The Wall Street Journal*. April 10, 2020.

[11] Ibid.

[12] <https://www.therapydogs.com/animal-assisted-therapy/>

[13]Castellano, J. (2015). “Pet therapy is a nearly cost-free anxiety reducer on college campuses.”
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jillcastellano/2015/07/06/pet-therapy-is-a-nearly-cost-free-anxiety-reducer-on-college-campuses/#36535044737d>

[14]Phillips.

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