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Editor  
*Consumer Reports* magazine  
(submitted electronically)

Dear Editor,

After reading "Tame your pet costs" in the August 2011 issue of *Consumer Reports* magazine, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) needs to add some advice to what your author has proposed.

We're all tightening our belts in this economy, and veterinarians understand the challenges facing pet owners. We know as well as anyone that pets play a valuable role in our daily lives. The current state of our economy often means cutting back on discretionary spending, yet we caution pet owners that some cutbacks could actually cost more in the long run – and have serious consequences on the health of their pets.

Veterinarians agree that not all pets need "premium" pet food. However, all pets do need quality, balanced nutrition and veterinarians are the best source for those nutritional recommendations for their individual pets. As the article stated, overfeeding a pet can lead to the development of conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or arthritis. These diseases will cost the pet owner much more in the long run, not to mention shorten the life of a beloved pet.

We agree that pet insurance may not be right or even necessary for everyone. Pet owners should thoroughly evaluate their options and make an educated decision as to whether pet insurance is a good investment for their particular situation. As the article stated, it's a good idea to have a "rainy day" fund to cover unexpected (or expected) veterinary expenses.

With the new flea and tick preventive medications on the market, prices for such products have dropped and may continue to do so. Pet owners need to make sure they are getting the right product for their pet and know how to properly administer it. Veterinarians are the best source of such medical information. Pet owners should be sure to ask their veterinarian about the best options for their pet based on environmental risk, the pet's health condition, and cost. After all, if a particular product doesn't work or isn't safe for that particular pet, it doesn't save any money.

Our biggest concern is with the overall generalization for price-shopping included in the article. We agree that price can be a factor when choosing a veterinarian, yet it should not be the only factor. Pet owners should find the right veterinarian for them and their pet. A medical emergency is no time to be price shopping. Ideally, pet owners should already have a trusted relationship with a veterinarian for the best results at such a critical time. For less urgent visits, it is certainly reasonable to ask what needs to be done

immediately and what can wait. It is simply not possible to make an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan, or give an accurate cost estimate over the phone without seeing the animal any more than physicians could do the same for their human patients.

As for prescription medications, the AVMA's Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics have long stated that veterinarians should provide written prescriptions upon a client's request. There is nothing wrong with price-shopping medications, yet pet owners must make sure to get them from a reliable source. Questions about any medication to be used in animals should only be directed to the qualified expert – a veterinarian, the person trained in using those medications in a variety of animal species.

Responsible pet ownership and preventive veterinary care can reduce the costs of preventable illness in animals. Home dental care may reduce the frequency of dental procedures in some animals. Vaccinations for preventable diseases such as distemper and parvovirus will save a lot of money compared to treating the diseases – and will likely save the pet's life. Vaccination isn't a one-size-fits-all procedure. Vaccine regimens should be tailored to the individual pet based on its risk in order to provide the best protection while minimizing costs.

The best solution for pet owners who want a healthy pet and want to minimize their veterinary medical expenses is to practice good preventive care. An annual veterinary medical examination that includes an evaluation of and recommendations on a pet's weight, feeding and exercise recommendations, vaccination needs, heartworm/flea/tick preventive medication, dental care and other health concerns is the best and safest investment for all concerned. As the saying goes, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Sincerely,  
Rene A. Carlson, DVM  
President, American Veterinary Medical Association