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Wild science: Breakthroughs in animal health care may hold treatments for humans

Bill Briggs, NBC News

21 hours ago



Dr. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz

Dr. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz checks the aorta of an anesthetized gorilla at the Los Angeles Zoo, where Natterson-Horowitz is a consulting physician. (He was deemed healthy.)

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While human doctors and veterinarians are usually thought to keep to their own corners of the animal kingdom, more are seeing the same maladies in their patients - from breast cancers to addictions to eating disorders - causing the two disciplines to increasingly team up to crack medical mysteries.

A **joint conference** Saturday of some 300 top physicians and veterinarians in New York City, which will include medical "rounds" by both groups at the Bronx Zoo, marks a seminal moment in the melding of these once-separate disciplines and, perhaps, a chance to make fresh scientific discoveries, experts say.

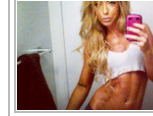
"We intend this as the beginning of a more productive collaboration. It's going to lead us to very good places," said Dr. Larry Norton, an oncologist and deputy physician-in-chief for breast cancer programs at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan.

"Mammals are mammals are mammals," Norton added. "There are

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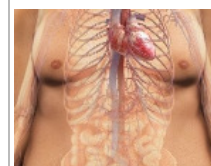
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more similarities than there are differences between the species. When these similarities [in illness] arise, they convey important information. The more knowledge we have about cancer in mammals, for example, the more we can help all the mammals – whether it's humans or the animals.”

Twin ailments among the planet's two-legged and four-legged creatures is, of course, sad on an individual level, yet such cases also are potentially fruitful for researchers, say physicians and veterinarians, who cite technological advances in helping to expose the parallels.

The shared afflictions span physical, psychological, even social realms. And animals with diseases once thought to be uniquely human have been found in the wild as well as in zoos, aquariums and homes.



Dr. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz

Dr. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz performs cardio-imaging on an anesthetized lioness with a buildup of fluid around her heart, at the Los Angeles Zoo.

Addiction has been detected in nature: Bohemian waxwing birds are known to get hooked on the juice of fermented berries just as some bighorn sheep become habitual grazers of lichen laced with psychoactive qualities. Obsessive-compulsive disorder has been diagnosed in a polar bear. Melanoma has been found on buffalo, and malaria in a penguin. In Australia, clusters of koalas carry chlamydia. In tigers, llamas and beluga whales, breast cancer is on the rise.

During the conference, pairs composed of one physician and one veterinarian each will discuss their version of the same cross-species case: an eating disorder in both a beagle and a middle-aged woman; neurodegenerative disease in both a 10-year-old boxer and a 45-year-old man; an anxiety disorder in both a pit bull and a 25-year-old woman.

“This is made to bridge those barriers that still exist – just because of

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a lack of knowledge, I think – between human medicine and veterinary medicine,” said Dr. Richard Goldstein, chief medical officer of the Animal Medical Center, a leading academic veterinary hospital based in Manhattan. He will be a presenter at the forum.

Across both branches of the science, there is a collective “movement” – a widening hunger to compare similar, naturally occurring diseases in animals and in people to better understand, diagnose, treat and heal the illnesses where ever they arise, Goldstein said.

This also is prompting a drift away from science relying so heavily on artificially inducing infirmities in lab animals, like mice and rats, in order to examine those ailments, he added.

“Anti-cancer vaccines for humans, based on veterinary technology, are in clinical trials right now. Those clinical trials probably would not have happened without the success of the animals studies,” Norton said. “These were pets that got cancer and their owners wanted the animals treated. They agreed to participate in trials of experimental vaccines.

“If we can help animals and at the same time help people, it’s a win-win,” Norton added.

The New York gathering is the third of its kind, and the biggest yet. The event is named after and inspired by the 2012 best-selling book “Zoobiquity: The Astonishing Connection Between Human and Animal Health,” written by cardiologist, wildlife enthusiast, and UCLA professor Dr. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz.

“If I contributed something to this conversation, I think it is looking beyond [animal-to-human] infection to some of these really intriguing areas that are hiding in plain site, beyond cancer and beyond heart disease to a shared overlap in psychiatric illnesses,” said Natterson-Horowitz, an organizer of the event.

In practice, she consults the Los Angeles Zoo, helping to treat a heart ailment in a lioness and using cardio-imaging to confirm that a western lowland gorilla had a healthy aorta. But she is equally drawn to conditions that, in humans, carry stigmas, such as certain mental-health impairments.

She’s been fascinated to learn, for example, that a form of OCD occurs in dogs and that self-harming is found in horses that bite their own flanks and in birds that pluck their feathers – both as coping mechanisms to combat feelings of stress or isolation.

“For patients who struggle with eating disorders, OCD, addictions or self-injury, I think understanding that these same behaviors have existed in the wild for many millions of years has the potential to be de-stigmatizing,” Natterson-Horowitz said. “It is powerful on so many levels to simply know that, in having these, we are not alone.”

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