

The Patron Saint of Pets

Dr Harry

A few years back, I stumbled over a program called 'Talk To The Animals' starring TV vet Dr Harry Cooper. It became regular viewing in our household and then later, 'Harry's Practice', was mandatory Sunday viewing during dinner. When a good friend of mine had a program screening at the same time on a rival network; I had to fib that I was watching it. Secretly, I couldn't switch channels and lose precious viewing time from one of my favourite shows.

He started on radio over 27 years ago and then progressed to TV. 'Talk To The Animals' ran four years and 'Harry's Practice' was on the air for six. It's still a mystery as to why Channel 7 cancelled such a high rating show. Thankfully we can still catch Dr Harry on small segments in 'Better Homes Et Gardens'. When I scheduled this interview, it became clear that Harry Cooper is a very busy man and shows no sign of slowing down. He's a keen horticulturalist, author, races Greyhounds, shows horses and makes many personal appearances throughout the country. All this and he's still a practicing vet.

At the start of his career he practised at Gladesville Veterinary clinic in Sydney and later moved to Tasmania where he lives with wife Nadine and daughter Heidi. Trying to fit an interview into his busy schedule proved to be tricky but I managed to hook him one evening—after he had returned from fishing, having snagged a trout.



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You grew up in Sydney is that correct?

"Yes, that's right. I grew up in a place called Linley Point, on the banks of the Lane Cove River. In those days, there were very few houses and we had a house that was one block away from the river. I can remember my father saying "I should've bought that block of land". And yes he should've because he could've divided it into four blocks and retired—it would be worth a fortune today. Fishing and playing by the river was a big part of my childhood. We built our own swimming pool out of rocks on the waterfront and we had an old boat that we used for fishing."

When did you move to Tasmania?

"We moved here on Anzac Day about 16 years ago after buying a cattle property. We had toured through the area some two or three years earlier. Heidi, our daughter, was just a little baby and we stayed in all these B&B's and we went through a little township there called Chudleigh. I remember the petrol bowsers were such that they had these big glass cylinders on the top of them and you pumped the petrol up into the glass cylinder until you got the appropriate amount of petrol and just let it run into the tank of the car down this tube. I looked at my wife and said this is either a set for 'The Sullivans' (TV show) or it's just a time-warp. I couldn't remember when they had the same sort of pumps on the mainland. I said how could anyone possibly live in an area like this? But we loved the area and bought a farm about two miles down the road."

Did your appreciation of animals stem from your parents and their interests?

"Yeah, my dad bred just about everything. He had fox terriers, he raced greyhounds and quarter horses, he had homing pigeons and fancy pigeons, roller canaries and Yorkshire canaries. He had quite a variety of poultry including pigeons and coloured muscovy ducks.

But he also had a huge collection of roses. He was a keen gardener, and I've inherited that, I love gardening as well. It's been so nice, because I've been able to go out and buy a lot of the old roses that are still in catalogues if you search for them. They're the same ones my dad grew—unusual roses that people have never heard of today. I feel it's a real connection to my past.

My mother had a beautiful voice and so does my daughter, Heidi. Heidi's talent comes half from my side of the family and half from Nadine's. I know she's going to be successful in show business somehow."

So, you don't think she's going to follow you into Veterinary Science?

No not at all! (laughs). She's going have a year off and work a little, get a bit street-wise and perhaps do a catering/bar course. Then she hopes to be accepted into the Queensland Conservatorium. Her interest lies in musical comedy."

You were one of the first recognised Avian specialists in this country? Did this follow on from your upbringing with birds?

"It was through an experience in my 4th year at Veterinary school. The lecturer turned up with a budgerigar brought in by some clients. People would come into the University for vets to see. Often an animal was brought out to the students as a learning experience. A clinical instructor was always there to tell us what we should be looking for.

One day he had this budgerigar with a lump on it and he said there was only one way to find out what lumps are in budgerigars and that's to cut them open. I thought 'really?!' So he just held this little, helpless bird in the palm of his hand, picked up a scalpel blade and sliced this lump open—without any anaesthetic—without anything. I flew across the floor and all but thumped him. I said, "How dare you do something like that!"

The bird died in his hand and that spurred me on to do something for avian care. I was appalled that birds were considered unimportant. I thought that if this is the level of avian medicine in this country then something had to be done—and done bloody quick! From that day on I didn't care how this lecturer was viewed, in my eyes he wasn't worth two bloody bob!

And so that's what spurred me on—a lecturer who had total disdain for bird medicine, their care and wellbeing. I came out of vet school and pursued this at Gladesville Veterinary Clinic. From there several of my contemporaries got together and attended a bird conference in Hawaii run by the American Association of Avian Veterinary Surgeons. It was the greatest learning experience of my life, listening to the Yanks.



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So we talked about our experiences, sharing knowledge and came away from it determined to form our own association here in Australia. Today I believe there are 35 members in all States of Australia. I lectured at Sydney University for around eight years, mostly in caged bird diseases."

I've seen moments within your TV programs where you've had to give someone bad news on the health of the animal. You do this with compassion—do you think compassion is something that someone can be taught or do you think it's inherently there?

"It's a bit of both. As a veterinary surgeon, I'm stunned by the number of my colleagues who don't have a rapport with animals because they don't have an animal of their own. So how can they understand what people feel if they haven't had that rapport. It can be with a bird, it can be with a cat, it can be with a dog, it can be with a horse—it can be with any animal you like. I feel that too high a percentage of my colleagues don't have a connection with their own animals to be able to translate that into an understanding the connection some people have with their own animals.

We've had people come out and lecture to us about what's called the 'human/animal bond' and they've talked to vets about how important this 'human/animal bond' is. You didn't have to tell me that, it came naturally as something I grew up with because my parents taught me a love and understanding of animals right from the start.

When I started in 'Talk To The Animals', I was asked, 'What are your aims?' I said I haven't got any aims—I just want to keep my job. After six months I realised I did have an aim and that was to teach children a love, understanding, respect and responsibility for animals—domestic and wild. I hoped that they would carry that through into their adult life, that they would teach their children as Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young once sang 'Teach Your Children Well! Teach the children because it's very hard to teach adults.'

You're often called in to deal with dogs with behavioural problems, utilising basic training methods. There's a new breed of trainers that believe obedience and terms like hierarchy are outmoded and 'parenting' is the new buzz-word. Your thoughts on this?

"Does that mean that they think that the dog is a child? Oh dear, I'll be round to fix them

up very quickly then, if they think that's the situation. Honestly, I think that people try to give animals a human perspective which they don't have, because they're animals.

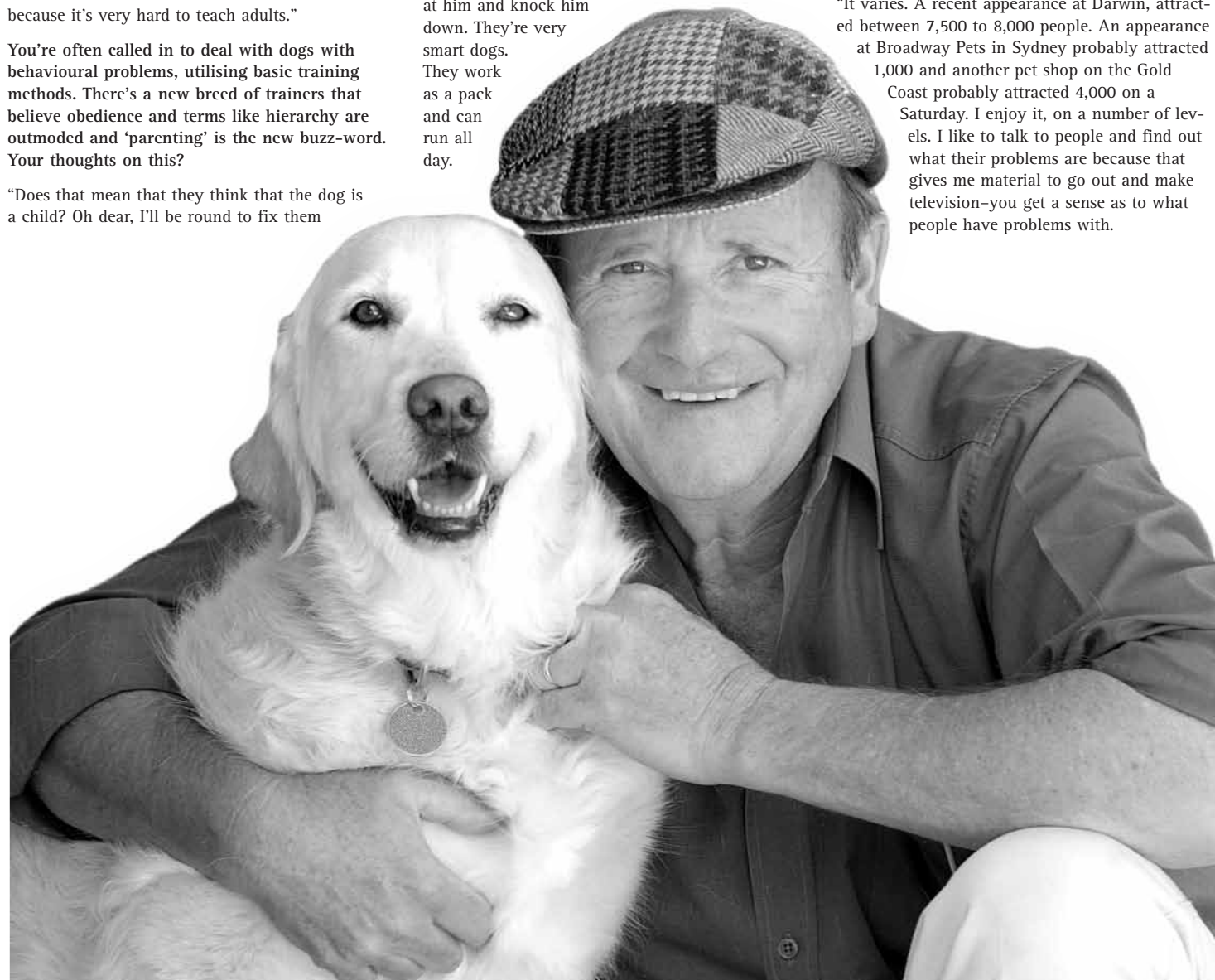
I always go back to the example of the farmer's dog. You look at the farmer's dog as he gets up in the morning, 'G'day Blue... get up on the ute.. let's go... we're going out the back paddock... you're gonna work all day... 10 hours.. you're gonna drink out of my hat 2 or 3 times a day if you're lucky and when we get back home, I'll put you back on the chain and I'll give you some dry food.' That dog would kill for that farmer, because that dog has so much respect for that man it doesn't matter.

Take the lady who carries the Maltese round on her hip the whole day. Half the time, the dog is at eye level. So naturally, the dog thinks it's as good as she is! That dog doesn't have any real respect for that woman—she becomes a doormat. The dog's in charge and they're the ones I have to go round and sort out. I say 'Put the dog down on the floor, it's got four legs let it walk around.. I can't help people that consider a dog to be a baby—it's a dog spelt D-O-G not D-O-L-L!'"

I understand you have a fascination with Wild African Dogs. What about them interests you so much?

"I'd never encountered them until a keeper at Dubbo Zoo related a story about how smart these dogs are. One day a dog fell lame and naturally the keepers entered the enclosure to check the dog out. One keeper went after the dog in one direction while the other kept the rest at bay. The fellow guarding the pack suddenly realised there were three dogs missing. The three dogs missing were stealthily creeping up behind the keeper who was trying to capture the lame one. Turns out it wasn't lame at all—it was just feigning it.

The other keeper turned around just in the nick of time to see these dogs charge at him and knock him down. They're very smart dogs. They work as a pack and can run all day.



Such is their stamina that they'll run a Zebra to exhaustion. They can even run an Antelope to exhaustion—they're quite a fantastic animal."

Do they have special bonds different from a domestic dog?

"It's a female dominated society, which is a little bit different to the wolf. The female chooses her own mate every year and she subjects the rest of the tribe or the pack, or whatever you want to call it, to such a horrific physical and mental battering that she actually suppresses oestrus cycle in most of the females. They are so stressed by her, that they really don't cycle. If any of them do cycle, they tend to only have one or two pups only fathered by one of the subservient males.

The lead female picks out the male she wants to mate with and won't let any other male mate with her. But on the next season she'll pick another male. She avoids inbreeding, but if any of the other subservient females have offspring she will go and kill them. So that the only offspring that survives are her offspring— it's a very female dominated lineage."

You've seen them also in the wilds in South Africa, are they a species under threat of extinction?

"Yes. The numbers are dwindling. The problem is a lot of them have been shot in the wild. They prey on farmed livestock in their own territory and farmers hunt them down and shoot them because of this. There's a number of captive breeding programs to boost numbers and they're having fantastic results."

I've seen you at a variety of appearances and pet expos. You're so generous with your time towards the general public. People approach you with all sorts of questions. Can you even estimate how many personal appearances you made in the last year?

"I know that in the six months say from the 30 June to the end of December, I made 13 personal appearances. Nearly every second weekend I was somewhere. I did seven in a row and then five in a row. Some of them were full weekends and others were just for one day."

How many people do you see in a day?

"It varies. A recent appearance at Darwin, attracted between 7,500 to 8,000 people. An appearance at Broadway Pets in Sydney probably attracted 1,000 and another pet shop on the Gold Coast probably attracted 4,000 on a Saturday. I enjoy it, on a number of levels. I like to talk to people and find out what their problems are because that gives me material to go out and make television—you get a sense as to what people have problems with.

I just like people anyhow, I'm a people person and I like talking about animals. I suppose it's the old expression 'It comes with the territory.' Because I'm an ambassador for Channel 7 so it doesn't matter whether I'm on camera or whether I'm walking down the street of Launceston. People come up to talk to me and I think taking time out with any question or problem is important. If you're nice to somebody they tell two people, if you're rude they tell 200."

Don't you ever want to put your feet up and take it easy, enjoying the roses in Tasmania?

"I'll keep going until I'm no longer wanted. I enjoy it and at this point I see no reason to slow down. My mother always said "better to have a slice of cake, then no cake at all!"

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