

use them to make the environment more friendly to our patients', says the veterinarian noticing Cosimo's curiosity. She fills out the admission form on the ambulance computer, takes the cat's Euromedi-care card number and gives Cosimo Pepe's admission code and the phone number of the Feline Intensive Care Unit at the Hospital. 'He speaks blue', says Cosimo. 'Oh, he's got one of those silicon chips? Good, our ethologist has one too. He'll love communicating with Pepe. These brain chips make the diagnostic process so much more efficient. If everything goes well we will bring him back this afternoon'. Afternoon. Such an old word, thinks Cosimo. Even though it makes no sense to refer to noon with Global Time, still a lot of people use it, especially here in Southern Europe. A few more years and probably no one will even remember how many GTU's an hour was.

Back in his bedroom, Cosimo is absent-mindedly listening to the 400 GTU TV News while getting ready for school. The commentator is reporting the headline news: 'The first contingent of experimental cats reached the Moon Orbiting Station "Ulysses" yesterday. In-flight veterinarian Dr. Juan Prats, who communicates with the cats through his subdural silicon chip, says the ten animals told him in their blue-language that they coped very well with their trip, which lasted almost 2300 GTU's. These cats will be used in a pilot study to monitor the long-term effects of a zero gravity environment, in order to collect data about the welfare of felines travelling to outer space with their owners. This is a joint study carried out by NASA and a consortium of three European and two North American universities, sponsored by British Airways and American Airlines, and coordinated by ISFM, the International Society of Feline Medicine. We have a special guest with us today, Professor Peter Forster, a world-renowned feline specialist and researcher at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in London, and President of the ISFM. Professor Forster, let me start by asking you a provocative question: Why should we send cats into space? Why not start this type of experiment using dogs? After all, the dog is still considered by many to be man's best friend, and a Russian female dog, by the name of Laika, was the first animal ever to travel to outer space almost 100 years ago, in November 1957.'

'Well, had we started this study half a century ago we would probably have considered the dog as a model. Back then dogs and cats were equally valued for their role in our society as companion animals. However, over the last 50 years things have changed remarkably. According to the last feline census carried out by our society in 2050, in Western Europe alone there are about 120 million cats, 80 per cent more than the first official figure attained in 2018 (nobody knows exactly how many cats there were before this date), while the Western European canine population has remained stable, at 75 million, for the past 35 years. Furthermore, cats live longer than dogs: the average life expectancy of cats is currently estimated to be 29 years, while that of dogs is still only 18 years. The fact that cats live with their owners for a very long time makes them better suited than dogs to learn how to communicate with humans using the subdural silicon chip, the cerebral communication technology through which we can perceive animal brainwaves as coloured messages. For some animals, learning how to speak the 'blue language', as they call it, may require up to a few years of practice before a two-way man-animal communication can be established. As leisure space travel becomes increasingly common, airline companies are being confronted with requests from people who wish to travel with their cats. That is why British Airways and American Airlines were keen to invest in our project.'

'Why do cats live longer than dogs? Are they treated better than their canine counterpart?'

'I would not say that cats are treated in a different way to dogs by their owners. Life expectancy has actually increased for both species over the last 50 years, especially since the quality of pet care has improved to the point that kidney and heart transplants are performed routinely in the 52 veterinary organ transplantation centres throughout Europe. Also, many viral diseases have been eradicated and a network of pet intensive care units is available throughout The Continent, allowing the lives of many critical patients to be saved. Cats have always been a little more long-lived than dogs, but the main reason why they now live so much longer is probably that cat breeders have been quicker to realize that

inbreeding can have a disastrous effect on health and longevity. Feline cross breeding became fashionable in the 20's, which has caused the disappearance of a few breeds over the last 30 years, but has had a remarkably positive effect on the health, reproductive capacity and longevity of our cats.'

'If cats are travelling through the Solar System now, where will they go from here? With the most recent propulsion technology, man is now on the verge of exploring the space-time barrier. Will cats be allowed to travel across time with us in the future, or is this only science fiction?'

'To speculate how far we can go, we should consider how far we have come. If 100 years ago we had forecasted a need for specialists in fields such as small animal cardiology, neurology and ophthalmology, nobody would have believed us. Likewise, 80 years ago nobody would have imagined that cat clinics would develop all over the world, nor would anybody have predicted 60 years ago that pet cloning would become the fastest growing business in the veterinary medical field. Even cerebral communication between man and animals and space travel for cats were considered impossible only 40 years ago. At any rate, it is probably a bit too early to talk about travel across time for animals. Let's see what happens with humans first.'

'Professor Forster, the Space-Cat project is one that you have pursued for the past 15 years, a dream that has now become reality, so to speak. We, or I guess cats, could say that the future is here. This is just another one of your ideas that is proving correct, like the subdural silicon chip which you patented on behalf of the University of London about 15 years ago, the creation of EANOS, the European Animal Network for Organ Sharing which allows veterinary transplant centres to exchange canine and feline lungs, hearts and kidneys throughout the European Union, and the development and commercialisation of the PA, the Pet Airbag which has made travelling in cars safer for pets too, just to mention a few. How come your intuition always proves right? How can you be such a visionary? Can you tell us what your secret is?'

'Good question. Well, being a visionary is commonly perceived as a peculiarity of successful people. However, unlike what most people think, having vision is not a gift or a quality but rather an art or a technique that can be learnt and improved. In order to be a visionary, it is necessary a) to have a deep knowledge of the history of a certain problem and b) to make a clear analysis of the present situation using the best available information. The difficult part is to filter information (which nowadays is available in huge quantities), to select it and work with only high quality, well-refereed data, which enable us to make forecasts. So, history and the best available scientific information: these are the keys to understanding the present and to extrapolating the future. Now, as clinicians we normally try to anticipate the future every time we see a patient: we collect the patient's history, then analyse the current situation by performing a clinical examination, after which we work on the information gathered to formulate a diagnosis and to prescribe a treatment. The diagnostic-therapeutic process is therefore an attempt at anticipating the future. In order to maintain our "forecasting ability", we must keep studying the past and the present, and must scrutinise available scientific information by reading and analysing current issues, all the while focusing our attention on high quality publications. Our capacity to read and memorise information is not infinite. Therefore, we must be very selective in how we use our reading time, making sure that we base our decisions on scientific material coming from the best possible sources. To those of us working in scientific and clinical medicine, having access to up-to-date, high quality, well-refereed scientific literature is an invaluable tool: the key to anticipating the future.'

'I look at the future because that is where I will spend the rest of my life'
Edward D. Woods, Jr.