

Holistic Healing

A glimpse at veterinary acupuncture

BY EMILY VOLMAN

We all have our share of health changes as we get older; however, the biggest problem for Bumper, an 18-year-old Appaloosa gelding, was glaucoma. She had not been responding to traditional medical treatments, so her guardian took her to Dr. Marc E. Smith at Natchez Trace Veterinary Hospital to try veterinary acupuncture.

"We treated her with a mixture of acupuncture and herbal medicine, and it dramatically effected the glaucoma," says Dr. Smith. "I still have trouble believing it, but you can measure the inner-optical pressure in the eye, and there is no arguing with the numbers."

Veterinary acupuncture is a treatment modality based on inserting needles, injections, low-level lasers or magnets into predetermined acupuncture point sites, known as acupoints. "In eastern terminology, it works by effecting the flow of the animal's 'Qi' [which is pronounced 'chee' and is considered to be the body's energy center in Chinese philosophy]," says Dr. Smith. "In western medical terms, it works by stimulating certain nerves, altering the blood flow mechanics to certain sites and—many times—releasing neuro-transmitters." By inserting these fine, slender needles into the proper acupoints, nerve endings are stimulated and actually help the body to heal itself.

Acupuncture, along with other Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) practices, has been around for several thousands of years. However, in 1973, the American Medical Association Council of Scientific Affairs declared acupuncture an experimental medical procedure. Soon after, Richard Nixon's efforts to improve relations with China raised the interest of acupuncture considerably here in America. Today acupuncture is taught in veterinary schools across the country—such as the University of Tennessee's College of Veterinary Medicine—

and the American Veterinary Medical Association has called acupuncture "an integral part of veterinary medicine."

Acupuncture is just one of five phases in TCM that works in tandem with diet, herbs, meditation and massage or chiropractics, and can treat most chronic diseases such as circulatory, gastrointestinal, neurological, immune and pain disorders. Dr. Smith, like a growing number of veterinarians throughout the country, incorporates both eastern and western medicines together as a complete medicinal program for animals. "They are two diagnostic systems, and I integrate the two," he says. "Typically, western medicine is better for surgical diseases and acute treatments, while eastern medicines may be better for chronic illnesses. The results take longer but can be more reliable. I try to give people options to maximize the strengths of both systems while minimizing the weaknesses."

And this combination seems to work well for many of Dr. Smith's clients. "I have been a diehard western practitioner and tend to be very conservative, but I have seen several cases that I can hardly believe myself," he explains. One such case was an elderly dog that was referred by another doctor after they could not find an official western diagnosis. "The dog had been on traditional treatment for over a week and was not responding. She could not move. We started an acupuncture and herb therapy system, and five days later she was up walking around like normal. I don't know if that was the acupuncture or not, but I do know that when she came in, she couldn't walk and when she left, she walked home."

Smith is fair in his judgment on the effects of acupuncture. "It's not going to work in every case. It's not a panacea. It does work in situations where western medicine either fails to work or the condition precludes the use of western medicine, but I have seen

things that, as a western practitioner, have surprised me. Even though I did all of the treatment on these animals and saw it happen firsthand, I still struggle with believing it." Smith has seen most of acupuncture's value on geriatric animals because of its amazing abilities to relieve chronic pain.

And speaking of pain: although the thought of poking needles into you or your pet's body may sound uncomfortable, most don't even feel the needles, which are usually the size of a human hair or smaller. In fact, because certain acupoints are used to stimulate the body to release endorphins (which interact at different levels in the central nervous system to inhibit pain perception in higher centers and inhibit pain transmission from the spinal cord), most pets become quite relaxed during the treatment and some even fall asleep.

Treatments can range anywhere from ten seconds to 30 minutes depending on your pet's needs and often need to be repeated several times to achieve optimal results. The procedure is very safe and has been known to be even safer than some western medicinal procedures due to acupuncture's rare side effects. That said, it's important to work with a certified veterinary acupuncturist to ensure proper results.

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