

Alternative Vet Care Moves into the Mainstream

Veterinary acupuncturist Dr. Audrey Shannon's grateful clients include dogs, cats and the occasional horse.

Duke, an exuberant 11-year-old black Labrador retriever, was eager to meet his new healthcare provider. But as he sat by the front door, his weakened rear limbs could not keep him upright. Duke had recently received a diagnosis of degenerative myelopathy, a degenerative spinal-cord disease that is inevitably fatal.

Despite a helpful course of physical therapy early in his diagnosis, Duke's condition was worsening. When his owner, Camilla Crandall, asked her regular veterinarian what she could do for her dog, he suggested that she try acupuncture. Crandall called Dr. Audrey Shannon, DVM, a licensed veterinarian who also has extensive training in traditional Chinese veterinary medicine.

Dr. Shannon, who runs the mobile business Animal Acupuncture Vet, suspected that Duke's diagnosis was incorrect. She immediately embarked on a course of treatment that included traditional and electro-acupuncture (the application of a pulsating electrical current to acupuncture needles), along with herbs, supplements and a change of diet that embraced fresh, cooked foods.

Like most animals, Duke was curious about the new procedure, and he quickly embraced his in-home treatments. In less than a month, he was walking with strength and coordination, and the knuckling-under of his rear paws was gone.

Duke's case is not unusual. According to Dr. Shannon, older dogs who have difficulty get-

ting up frequently receive a diagnosis of degenerative myelopathy, even though they are actually suffering from "old dog's syndrome" — musculoskeletal and neurological weaknesses that result from a long and active life.

In Duke's case, Dr. Shannon consulted with Dr. Roger Clemmons, the nation's pre-eminent authority on degenerative myelopathy.



(He is also on the faculty of Florida's Chi Institute of Chinese Medicine, where Dr. Shannon trained.) Dr. Clemmons agreed that peripheral neuropathy and general weakness are often misdiagnosed as degenerative myelopathy, and that these non-fatal conditions frequently improve with acupuncture.

It is evident from Dr. Clemmons' recommendation that animal acupuncture has advanced rapidly from a fringe treatment to mainstream acceptance. The American Veterinary Medical Association's guidelines state that "veterinary acupuncture and acupotherapy are now considered an integral part of veterinary medicine."

Dr. Shannon adds, "While Western medi-

cine is appropriate for treating an infection or for surgery, traditional Chinese veterinary medicine is great for restoring the animal to health. We all need to be more integrative in our approaches. When I can't treat an animal's condition, I recommend a Western medical workup and treatment, and when Western medicine can't treat a condition, its practitioners are increasingly considering alternative modalities like acupuncture."

Dr. Shannon has also seen a change in the clients who seek her services. "When I started my acupuncture practice six years ago, many people tried acupuncture only as a last resort," she says. "Now they are seeking it out as their pet's primary treatment modality. People also tell me that they want their dog or cat to be treated by a holistic practitioner because they use alternative and holistic modalities for themselves, and they believe in their efficacy."

Dr. Shannon's calm, compassionate manner is an outgrowth of growing up on a farm, where she felt a strong connection with animals from an early age. She began her study of veterinary acupuncture while attending veterinary school at Washington State University, where she conducted research on a herd of spitting alpacas. The wild animals calmed down for their relaxing treatments, and the research demonstrated that their reproductive and immune systems improved with acupuncture.

Today, Dr. Shannon's more domesticated clientele (cats, dogs and the occasional horse) are equally receptive to acupuncture. Although owners often see results after the first treatment, not every case offers immediate change. Take Rascal, a 9-year-old Dalmatian who had been severely abused before being adopted by Dr. Pamela Burnham. With the help of ongoing acupuncture treatment and training, Rascal has gradually been trans-

formed from a wild and unpredictable dog to a calm family member. Rasca has even become trustworthy enough to assist Dr. Burnham in her own trauma-therapy practice.

Because acupuncture is helpful in palliative and end-of-life care, many of Dr. Shannon's clients are geriatric. Recently, she began working with Sam, an 11-year-old Rottweiler who had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The owners, Michael and Marilyn Smith, had heard that acupuncture could alleviate the side effects of Sam's chemotherapy.

"Michael found me through my website," says Dr. Shannon. "We've started acupuncture, and Sam continues to have a good appetite and energy. She also has a good quality of life, which was the most important thing for Michael and Marilyn."

Acupuncture can be used to treat conditions that range from neurological and behavioral issues to immune system and digestive disorders. Dr. Shannon's in-home service allows her to observe her animal clients in their natural environment, and to make a thorough assessment of the factors that affect the pet's health and well-being. These include the patient's personality and behavioral traits; the quality of the pet's food, water and air; and the interaction between the guardian and pet.

The physical exam begins with an assessment of the animal's overall energy, followed by an inspection of the tongue, eyes, ears, skin, hair, pulse and areas of sensitivity. Traditional Chinese veterinary medicine focuses on the whole patient, rather than specific symptoms. In addition to acupuncture, Dr. Shannon also prescribes herbs and supplements.

"Like humans, animals do better with fresh foods, as opposed to processed foods," she says. "Although raw food is a good concept, it tends to work better for healthy animals than for unhealthy or older animals. Many of my clients can't digest raw foods, but they benefit from the bio-available nutrients found in fresh, cooked foods."

Dr. Audrey Shannon offers home veterinary acupuncture visits; phone and e-mail consultations are available in the areas of food therapy and herbal remedies. To contact Dr. Shannon, e-mail drshannon@animalacupuncturevet.com, or call 820-2617. To learn more about traditional Chinese veterinary medicine, visit www.tcvn.com.



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