An Introduction to Holistic Veterinary Medicine and Integrating Holistic Therapies into Veterinary Practice

Jordan Kocen, DVM, MS, CVA
Veterinary Holistic Center
Springfield, VA

Introduction

The Veterinary field has seen a dramatic rise in interest in Holistic Therapies in the last few years. There has been increased public demand and an increase in enrollment in classes by veterinarians. At the end of the 1980’s the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS) provided a class every other year for 60 veterinarians and senior veterinary students. The demand has grown so much that for several years they offered an annual course with 100 seats and enrollment was limited to graduate veterinarians. IVAS has sponsored classes in Australia, England, Belgium, Norway and Canada. Classes are also taught at the Chi Institute in Florida, Colorado State University and Tufts University. Veterinary Chiropractic is taught at the Healing Oasis Wellness Center in Wisconsin and in Wellsville, Kansas at the Options for Animals Chiropractic program. Homeopathy courses focus on Veterinary Homeopathy so we don’t have to “translate” from human classes. Professional organizations like the American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture (AAVA), the Veterinary Botanical Medicine Association (VBMA) and American Academy of Homeopathy (AVH) have been formed to provide continuing education and an environment to promote a better understanding of their respective therapies in a traditional and modern scientific light. Most Veterinary colleges have Student Chapters of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA) and some now have Departments of Integrative Medicine. The AHVMA annual conference routinely has attendance that includes 15% first time attendees and has expanded into multi-tract lectures for the 4 day conference. The conference includes a day long lecture series to provide an overview of the many therapies that veterinarians are adding their practices.

Many practitioners are learning a single new therapy to add to their practices. Some then go on to learn other treatment modalities as well. Often the new therapy is used simply as an additional service for their clients and in some cases the public demand is so great for Alternative Therapies that the majority of their appointments are for non-conventional treatments.

Definitions

“Holistic Medicine” has come to mean any of the non-conventional medical therapy. Alternative and Complementary are also terms that are used to
describe these medical therapies. The term “Holistic Medicine” doesn’t refer to any particular therapy; it is more a way of looking at the case. Holistic in its broadest sense means that all of the symptoms are taken into account in the case evaluation. This includes mental, physical and emotional symptoms.

The entire symptom picture is recognized as inter-related, that is, the whole animal is considered. Examples of therapies that fall under the Holistic umbrella include Acupuncture, Western and Chinese Herbal Medicine, Chiropractic, Homeopathy and Ayurvedic medicine.

By their very nature these therapies tend to be “Holistic”. They focus on evaluating the entire patient. They work by stimulating the immune system and the medications used are usually of a non-synthetic or unrefined nature as opposed to modern drug therapies.

For a while most nutritional supplement were classified as Holistic but now the use of glucosamine-chondroitin, fish oil and probiotics are used in general practice daily. The multitude of supplements flooding the market make it almost impossible for anyone to be familiar with all of the products.

Many Holistic practitioners focus on preventive strategies as well as working on current problems. Issues that come up are diet, vaccination protocols and lifestyle. Some of these new therapies may be applied in a very “conventional” way, but the results are much more significant if the principles of a Holistic approach are also applied to the case.

**Principles of Holistic Therapy**

In my experience all theories are just a way to explain observed phenomenon. And different approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is important to understand the strength and weakness of each approach so you can determine what the most appropriate therapy is for any given situation. Holistic Therapies tend to all have several things in common that differentiate them from conventional medical therapy.

**Self healing**

A concept common to alternative therapies is that the individual has the ability to heal themselves and the therapy is directed at aiding that process. Therefore the doctor does not cause the healing to occur; they only facilitate the process. The more options the doctor has available to offer the patient, the more efficient the doctor can be at affecting the curative process.

**Symptoms**

Health is not the absence of symptoms, but the absence of disease. Many approaches view symptoms in quite a different way than we do in Western medicine. Symptoms are created by the body when it is in the process of trying to re-establish a state a health. We all recognize that a fever, for example, is a positive process when a microbial invader is present. The
elevated body temperature will have a negative effect on the organism and help to activate the host immune system. A prolonged fever, however, can create problems of its own. The conventional approach is to stop the process, that is, give an antipyretic. This action will unfortunately shut down the healing process and prevent the individual from being able to rid itself of the pathogen. The holistic approach is to try to figure out why the body was unable to finish the healing process on its own and help it to do so. In chronic disease situations this approach can often take longer than the conventional approach, but the individual will be healthier for finishing the process on its own. It has “learned” how to effect a curative reaction from start to finish.

Our knowledge of the details of healing are not yet complete, so the attempt to micromanage the process tends to perpetuate the state of ill-health and although those particular symptoms may be resolved the individual tends to continue to have problems that recur or manifest elsewhere. This is not another disease, just another manifestation of the state of ill-health.

The individual often presents with acute symptoms that are not a disease itself, but simply an acute manifestation of a chronic disease state. That is, the individual is never well, they continually manifest symptoms that may or may not occur the same way time after time.

In conventional medicine we tend to believe that if one is not sick, that they must be healthy. The symptoms are seen as the problem and once the symptoms are under control, the patient is no longer sick. Medication is chosen that can help control any symptom of a disease process. The Holistic approach views symptoms as the body’s attempt to return itself to a state of health, not just a state of “not sick.” Therefore the therapies are directed at aiding this process, not just removal of symptoms.

Energy

There is an underlying idea that the individual is an “energetic being” and that the state of this “energy field” is reflected on the physical plane creating the state of health which the individual perceives. The therapies are therefore directed at stimulating the energy field to return to a state of balance and normal flow. In Chinese Medicine this energy is called the Qi and in Homeopathy it is called the Vital Force. Quantum physics has a lot to say about the physical vs energetic state of matter and may hold the answer as to why some of these therapies work.

Disease and health manifest on 3 levels

The energetic state manifests on the physical, mental and emotional levels; so an imbalance may manifest on any of these levels. In fact, an imbalance, or state of ill-health, does indeed manifest on all 3 levels at the same time. We may not be able to appreciate the imbalance, but it is present none the less. An imbalance in the individual may start on one level and symptoms may develop on that level or any of the others. The correct therapy may therefore be to balance an area that does not appear to be where the current problem is,
but will lead to the deepest healing result and act to prevent future problems from occurring. From this we can see why a “Holistic” approach requires obtaining information about areas that do not appear to have a direct connection with the presenting complaint; i.e. evaluating the whole patient. An example could be a tendency to stress diarrhea: treatment of a single episode would not help to prevent future episodes, but treatment of the underlying weakness will not only help this episode, but can help prevent future episodes.

**Therapies**

**Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is the practice of placing thin, sterile stainless steel needles in specific locations on the body to effect a specific response. On a physical level the therapy stimulates nerve endings that result in repeatable results. Once you know what result you want, stimulation of the documented points should effect that result. Acupuncture is several thousand years old. It originated in China and is used extensively today in China, Japan and Korea.

**Chinese Herbal Medicine**

Chinese Herbal Medicine involves the use of compound products that are made up of individual components which are taken in the form of a water-extracted tea, an alcohol-extracted concentrate or in the form of tablets or powders. Most of the herbs are of plant origin, although some minerals and animals products are also used. There is an increasing amount of information becoming available about the effect of herbal products. Well respected producers maintain high quality manufacturing processes and source product evaluation. Most Chinese Herbal medicines are made up of 5 to 15 individual herbs.

**Western Herbal Medicine**

Western Herbal Medicine involves the use of European or American plant materials as medicinal products. They are often used singly or in small combinations. They may also be used in liquid, tablet or capsular form.

**Chiropractic**

Chiropractic therapy involves the use of gentle manipulation at the joints of the body to re-establish the proper alignment of the components of the joint. This removes stress and tension on these components allowing for optimal function of the individual. Chiropractors often use therapeutic ultrasound and lasers in addition to the manipulation techniques.
**Therapeutic Massage**

Just as for humans, massage therapy for dogs and cats can improve circulation, relieve tension and muscle strain, promote healing, and increase range of motion and flexibility. This hands-on treatment works well for pets suffering from chronic pain, anxiety issues, muscle spasms or atrophy, and problems associated with aging. Massage therapy has become an essential part of the canine athlete and working dog routine. Using massage techniques and trigger point therapy, we can enhance performance and potential, and improve quality of life.

**CranioSacral and Myofascial Release**

The Craniosacral system is made up of the membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord, the bones of the skull and sacrum and the cerebrospinal fluid. The bones of the skull and sacrum, previously thought to be fused, actually have slight movement along the adjacent surfaces. Craniosacral Therapy uses gentle manipulations to re-establish the normal movement within the craniosacral system resulting in decreased pain, improved neurologic messaging, and better health.

When a trauma occurs in one area of the fascia it can affect other places as well because of the web-like nature of the fascial net. Myofascial Therapy consists of gentle, directed stretching of the tissues to release tension and allow better movement of the “body stocking”.

**Homeopathy**

Homeopathy is a system of medicine developed over two hundred years ago in Germany by a human physician who wanted to develop a gentler way to treat his patients. Treatments of the day involved draining massive amounts of blood and administering poisons to the point of almost killing the patient. Often the treatment was more harmful than the disease. Homeopathy involves the use of a wide variety of source materials that include plants, salts, elemental substances and some animal products. The source material is prepared by a series of dilution and succussion (shaking) to produce a liquid which is then applied to milk sugar pills for ease of dispensing. This process has the result of removing the toxic effects and enhancing the medicinal properties of the source materials. Homeopathy is based on the idea that the body usually creates symptoms in an attempt to heal itself and persistent symptoms are evidence that is unable to finish the job. The proper medicine will stimulate a specific response which, when added to what the body is already doing, will stimulate the system to finish the job.
**Reiki/Energy Balancing**

Energy balancing involves the manipulation of the “energy body” of the individual. The practitioner acts as a channel for “universal” energy which then acts to re-establish the healthy state.

**Integrating Holistic Therapies into general practice**

**Why Bother??**

There are several reasons to investigate the use and value of alternative therapies. They include increased treatment options, client interest, personal interest and practice growth.

There are several reasons that veterinary practitioners are reluctant to add non-conventional therapies to their practices. Many of which are unfounded. One of them is that they think that to learn a new modality, they have to throw away all that they have learned in school and practice and stop using what has worked well for them in the past. But in reality, addition of new therapies is just an evolution, not a revolution, of veterinary medicine.

Different approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is important to understand the strength and weakness of each approach so you can determine what the most appropriate therapy is.

**Things to Think About**

There are several things to think about when considering the introduction of Holistic Therapies into veterinary practice. One is the cost of training. The costs include not only the tuition for classes but also travel, lodging and loss of income while attending classes.

Other things to think about include the space and time required compared to the practice of conventional therapies. For example, in an acupuncture case once the needles are in, the room is tied up for 20 to 30 minutes. Homeopathy and herbal cases often require time after the consultation to review the literature to determine the best course of action. This time must be accounted for. For most of these cases a minimum of 60 minutes is required for the initial intake. In my practice, the first acupuncture treatment is done during this time. In many practices a Holistic Consult is required to determine the best strategy and to discuss all of the options with the client. Then follow up visits are scheduled.

On the other hand, many of these therapies have low overhead. Acupuncture needles and Homeopathic remedies are not expensive. You do not need assistants to evaluate cases or place acupuncture needles. Much of the follow up on Homeopathy and Herbal cases can be done on the phone. So the practitioner can “see” many cases in a short amount of time compared to in-clinic rechecks. Refills and new prescriptions can be mailed or made ready to be picked up by the client. Clients must be prepped to understand that there
will be a fee for these phone consults, but they can also appreciate the fact they don’t have to transport the pet back to the clinic for all follow up visits.

**Particular Issues with Specific Therapies**

**Acupuncture, Chiropractic, Therapeutic Massage, CranioSacral, Reiki**

The cost of the needles is negligible in the case of acupuncture, but the room is tied up for 30 minutes and some of the support therapies such as laser, Ultrasound and activators do have a cost. An alternative to would be to limit appointments to times of the day when rooms vacant or scheduling follow up treatments as drop offs.

**Chinese and Western Herbal Medicine and Homeopathy**

The medications are relatively inexpensive. The issue here is accounting for the time for case evaluation and then deciding if you want to stock an herbal pharmacy or order as needed.

**What can you do to get started??**

Join the AHVMA. This organization provides an overview and ongoing discussion of the various modalities available. Their quarterly journal and annual conference provides a way for practitioners to learn and exchange ideas and experiences that are not available anywhere else. There are classes available in most of these modalities, so you can take a class or have an associate take a class. You could hire an associate with experience in Holistic therapies. Some practitioners begin by using herbs symptomatically and then move on to more formal or advanced training.

**Summary**

There are a variety of new therapies available to veterinarians which can increase the level of health in their patients. The majority of these Holistic therapies work by stimulating the body’s own natural repair mechanisms and so tend to have a low potential for negative results. Not all patients are responsive and response can sometimes take a while to manifest. There are several veterinary organizations that are dedicated to teaching the use of these therapies in the clinical practice and encouraging research into better understanding the method of action of these techniques and the medicines used.