

Veterinary acupuncture

Another Tool

by Troy Smith

Not so very long ago, the idea of a veterinarian prescribing acupuncture therapy would have raised some eyebrows, particularly among the practitioner's doubtful colleagues. During recent years, however, an increasing number of veterinarians have adopted treatment methods not taught through most veterinary college curriculums. And many skeptics have become advocates of acupuncture as an alternative approach to the treatment of animal disease and injury.

"I was looking for an alternative way to treat the lameness in my own daughter's horse. We weren't getting anywhere with conventional methods," says Iowa veterinarian Roger Reppert. "We finally went to a veterinary acupuncturist and achieved results without any drugs. I decided I had to learn more about it."

Ultimately, Reppert sought training and certification in veterinary acupuncture. Calling it "one more tool in the toolbox," he has been applying the ancient Chinese healing method for 10 years through his practice near Ireton. But rather than using the treatment as a last resort, Reppert views acupuncture as an adjunct to western veterinary medicine.

Acupuncture is commonly defined as the insertion of needles into specific points on the body to cause a desired healing effect. Variations may include injection of fluid (aquapuncture), massage or use of electricity, cold lasers or gold bean implants to stimulate acupuncture points associated with different body parts and functions. Stimulation of select points is used to treat maladies ranging

from musculoskeletal problems to respiratory, gastrointestinal and reproductive disorders. More than 1,000 acupuncture points can be used, but only about 360 points are involved in treatments of common animal ailments.

Using acupuncture

According to 4,000-year-old acupuncture philosophy, disease is the result of an imbalance of energy, or Qi (chee), in the body. The energy is said to flow through the body along certain channels called meridians. The meridians are related to the nervous system and various organs, so

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stimulation of points along the meridians will influence energy flow to re-establish balance, or create a healing effect.

In western terms, Reppert says, acupuncture prompts the body's own healing power through stimulation of nerves and increased blood circulation. Beneficial effects include the release of hormones, such as pain-controlling endorphins, and increased blood cortisone levels. Acupuncture may also trigger an increase in white blood cells, which is the body's mechanism for fighting infection.

"Knowledge of acupuncture is useful in making diagnoses," Reppert adds. "An animal's response to pressure, applied through palpation of certain points, can give us clues. Through the diagnostic points, an animal can talk to us — tell us where it hurts."

Frustrated by what he considered to be too many disappointing orthopedic surgeries

to correct hip dysplasia in dogs, Brad Bartholomay started reading about Chinese medicine and acupuncture in particular. After participating in a series of short courses and six months of training conducted by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS), Bartholomay began incorporating acupuncture in the treatment of small animals brought to his Casselton, N.D., clinic. From pets to horses and even cattle, Bartholomay has enjoyed considerable success when using acupuncture to complement western medical methods.

"That doesn't mean it works in each and every instance, but the longer I practice application of acupuncture, the more success I see," Bartholomay says. "I've had pretty good success with cattle when treating chronic bloat and other digestive disorders. Some of the best results came after using acupuncture to treat downer cows — cows that are unable to get to their feet after a difficult delivery (of a calf). Put very simplistically, it can help by stimulating nerves, relaxing or stimulating certain muscles, and suppressing pain."

Bartholomay has used his needles when western medicine offered little or no effective specific treatment. He cites cryptosporidiosis as an example. Caused by a protozoan parasite, cryptosporidiosis can cause severe diarrhea in young calves. The infection is self-limiting unless the animal's immune system is compromised. Bartholomay says acupuncture can complement traditional therapy, including rehydration and correction of acidosis, by relieving discomfort and stimulating the immune system.

Colorado veterinarian Tim Holt agrees that acupuncture can be used to amplify western medicine and hasten recovery. He practices the ancient procedure with increasing frequency. As more non-acupuncturist colleagues refer troublesome cases to Holt, the complementary therapy has become a more significant part of his Gunnison-area practice. Holt says he has applied needles in approximately 80% of recent cases involving horses and dogs.

"It definitely is not a cure-all. The degree of success varies with different cases, but I think it nearly always helps," Holt states. "I'm using it more and more with cattle, too. With newborn calves that are slow to start, there is a point just below the nostrils where you can stimulate heart rate and respiration."

While Holt also reports favorable results in scouring calves that weren't responding to the usual treatments, he doesn't recommend acupuncture as a substitute. Rather, he continues to administer intravenous or oral fluids, as well as antibiotics, while applying as

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many as 10 needles to enhance immune response by increasing blood flow and alleviating fever. In chilled calves, needle placement can be used to counter hypothermia.

“I use acupuncture quite a bit in cases of dystocia,” Holt adds. “Say you have a first-calf heifer that has been trying to calve for a while. The heifer is tired and the uterus is not contracting. The needles can be used to get things started again — to stimulate release of oxytocin and give the heifer an energy kick.

And we can use them to relax muscles when treating a uterine prolapse, then to fight shock, boost immune response and help her recover more quickly.”

Low-cost treatment

In many cases, acupuncture treatment is not particularly expensive. According to Holt, one-time treatment can cost as little as \$20. In some cases, he instructs producers in the application of needles for follow-up therapy. However, in many situations, including regular and repeated treatment of chronic conditions, the expertise of a trained and certified veterinary acupuncturist is

required. Generally, cost is related to the time involved due to the complexity of the treatment or the need for multiple or routine treatments.

Because of their attachment to companion animals, cost may be of less significance to pet owners. Hence, small animals often make up the majority of patients attended by veterinary acupuncturists.

Sentimentality can be a factor among horse owners, too, but the value of their animals for performance competition or breeding also drives the growing application of acupuncture therapy for horses.

In cattle, an animal's value for breeding

may warrant its consideration. Acupuncture has been used to stimulate production of higher-quality semen and improved libido in bulls and to bring anestrous cows into heat without the use of drugs.

Carl Martin, a veterinarian from Omaha, Neb., says all veterinarians have experienced cases where their patients exhibited limited responses to conventional treatments. His own frustration with such cases prompted him to seek additional avenues of approach, including chiropractic care as well as acupuncture.

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much about the subject. And there is need for more scientific study to fully realize the benefits of alternatives to traditional veterinary medicine," Martin says.

"I don't think we can be closed-minded about it. Acupuncture has helped me get results that may not have been achieved

otherwise," he adds. "It has helped me maintain a fresh approach to veterinary practice and made it more fun, too."

In most states, veterinary acupuncture is considered a surgical procedure that only licensed veterinarians may legally administer to animals. An accredited training and certification program is offered through the Colorado-based IVAS.

For lists of veterinarians trained in acupuncture, contact the IVAS at (303) 682-1167 or www.ivas.org; or The American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture (AAVA) at (973) 379-1100 or www.aava.org. 