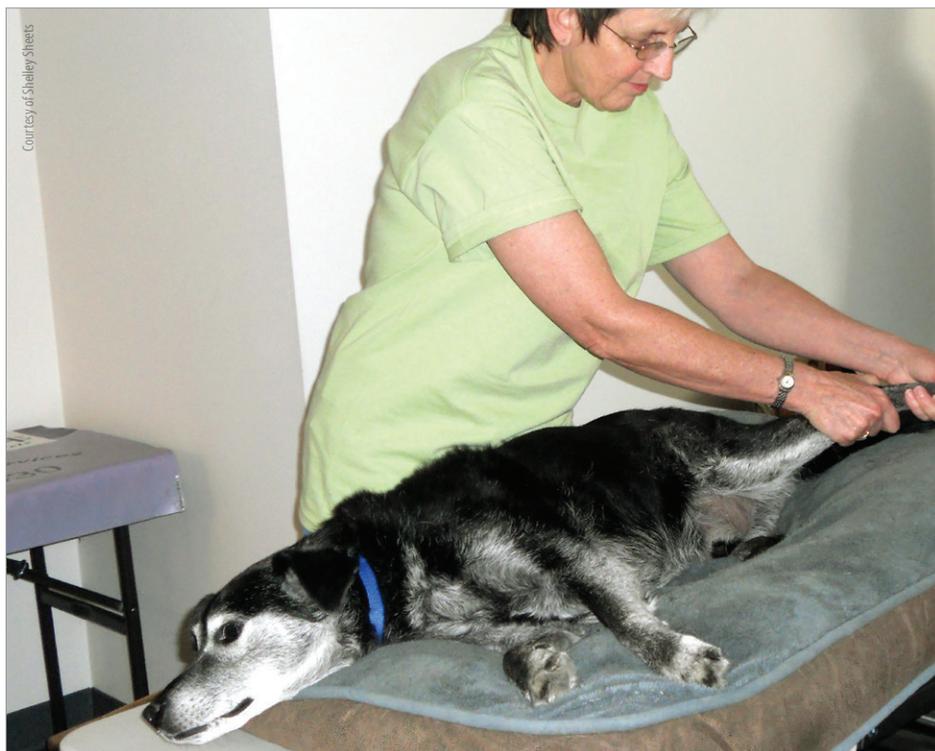


The Shifting Landscape of Veterinary Care



Courtesy of Shelley Sheets

Traditional and alternative therapies can mix.

by Shelley Sheets

We are living in changing times. As the public's interest and demands for the availability of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) increase, veterinarians are beginning to collaborate with a variety of therapists to round out their practice.

As a massage therapist for more than 20 years, I have learned firsthand how there can be a successful union of therapies in any type of medical practice. In this article we will look at some of the key elements necessary to make this happen.

As the trend to coordinate services continues, we may begin to see a shift from the traditional clinic—composed of one or two veterinarians, a technician, and a receptionist—to a multi-modal team of animal health care workers, either working on site or as independent contractors associated with a practice. One of the newest modalities being used by veterinarians in this model is massage therapy.

In the past 10 years, massage therapy has been moving from the human world into the equine and canine world. With the development of reputable training programs, both animal companions and veterinarians are beginning to recognize the benefits of a well-trained, knowledgeable, soft-tissue therapist as part of the health care team.

With this interest has come research into the benefits and indications for the



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use of massage therapy in veterinary medicine, creating evidence-based proof of the advantages of canine and equine massage for many forms of rehabilitation, pain management and palliative care.

Finding the right therapist

Finding a professional, well-trained therapist to integrate into the practice can be a challenge. At the present time there is no standardization for licensing or regulating of canine or equine massage.

The rules governing the practice of any type of massage therapy vary from state to state. That being said, several schools offer competent training programs that include in-depth study of anatomy, physiology, gait analysis, palpation and animal handling skills, to name a few.

More of these schools are beginning to be regulated by the department of higher education, making them accountable for the curriculum they teach and holding them to certain standards.

Yet, we all know that just completing a training program does not necessarily make someone competent at what they do. There is a big difference in someone completing an animal training program who already has a background in human massage, and someone who is doing this as a midlife career change and is being exposed for the first time to learning anatomy or has never worked with animals.

Learning the correct way to massage an animal or a person involves training in a specific skill set similar to physical therapy, occupational therapy or any other specialized form of treatment. When seeking a therapist for a practice, you may want to find out not only what training program the person has gone through, but what additional animal, as well as professional, background that person has.

Also, when searching for a therapist, be clear about the philosophy of your practice and make sure that the person you are interviewing is in agreement and will support your business goals.

Be open, ask questions, and make sure this person feels like a good fit for

your clients and your practice. Two professional massage organizations offer referral services to the general public as well as to those looking for employees.

Those organizations are the Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP) and the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA). They can be a good place to start if you don't have any other resources. You could also contact one of the local certifying schools in your area and ask for recommendations of graduates who have successfully completed their program.

Employee or contractor?

Next you will need to decide how to best integrate new modalities into your practice. The two most common models are having the therapist work as an employee or partnering with a therapist as a private contractor.

Each offers advantages and disadvantages. Going the route of hiring someone as an employee can work really well if this person can also work as a technician or front office person. By serving in more than one capacity the employee remains busy and has a chance to get to know clients, which can help promote business.

The downside to this model can be the lack of space. If you are limited to one exam room and are open six days a week, it may not make sense to offer massage therapy in the clinic. Unlike physical therapy, which is usually movement- and exercise-based, massage therapy calls for a calm, relaxed environment.

Although a therapist doesn't need a lot of room, providing a space that is quiet and comfortable can make a difference in the effectiveness of the treatment. In my own practice I use animal-specific relaxation music with the dogs either on my massage table or on a padded mat on the floor.

The more I can get the animal to relax, the more effective my treatment. If the dog perceives me as another veterinarian, or hears other dogs crying, barking or moving outside the door, it can be very distracting for achieving my ultimate goals.

Therefore, it makes sense in many cases to have a massage therapist who is an independent contractor, working on a referral basis, in a treatment space that is conducive to a more relaxed environment. Setting up this partnership can be fairly simple and has been done in a variety of ways; the simplest is to create a relationship with a therapist who has come recommended from a source you trust. He or she may work on-call only or have regular office days and hours.

Marketing is key

There needs to be a plan in place as to how to best promote new services to clients. From my own experience, everyone in the office needs to be educated to some degree about massage in order to recognize what type of clients can benefit most from my service.

Some clinics prefer that I use the same business cards as the rest of the associates so the business branding remains consistent. Other smaller practices leave the marketing materials and how I display them up to me.

I provide my own business cards and brochures with holders to display them. I also provide newsletters and other printed informational materials to clients that help to educate them about the benefits of massage and other CAM modalities.

Marketing becomes a two-way process, with each clinic that I am associated with giving out my information while I in turn give out the clinic's information to my personal clients. When you as the referring veterinarian have a patient that you feel could benefit from massage therapy, you offer the therapist's contact information to the client.

From there, the veterinarian should send a treatment plan with the client that lists the reason for the referral, recommended treatment and any areas of concern. A well-trained therapist will do a written history of the animal, as well as take detailed treatment notes, which can then be shared with the vet. In this way the vet and the massage therapist work

together as a team toward the best possible outcome for the patient.

It may also be a helpful business-building practice to the therapist as well as the clinic to have the massage therapist give both the staff and clients a short informational talk and demonstration on the benefits of massage for animals, or have the therapist come in occasionally to meet clients and answer questions.

Benefits of massage therapy

There are many situations, medical and behavioral, where massage can benefit both the animal and the animal companion.

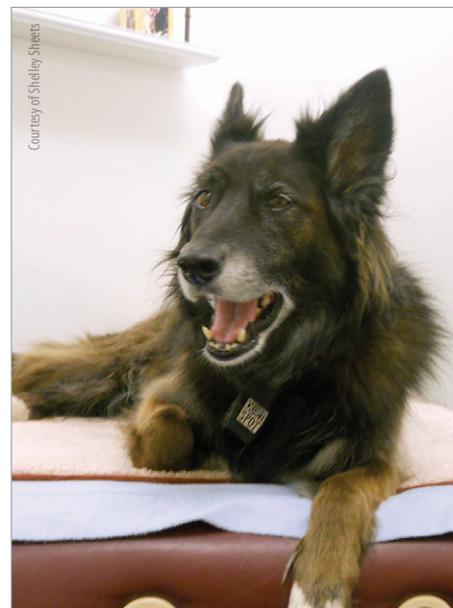
So what kinds of conditions would warrant the use of massage therapy in a veterinary practice? If a client has recently adopted a puppy or shelter dog, massage can be extremely helpful to calm the dog during the transition phase into the new home, thus helping to ensure a successful transition.

Also, with a new puppy, regular massage of the muzzle and gums not only brings a fresh blood supply to this area but helps to get the puppy used to having its mouth handled, which can often make dental care easier.

The same occurs with massage of the feet. If the dog equates a pleasant experience with foot handling, nail trimming can be much less traumatic. These are techniques that a therapist can demonstrate the first time on the dog and then encourage the animal companion to continue on their own.

The majority of my clients are senior dogs, usually large or giant breeds, which are experiencing problems with hip and low back pain. Some of my Newfoundlands have had hip dysplasia since they were young, and by age 5 or 6 (sometimes sooner) are now having difficulty getting up or getting around. Most of these dogs by this time are on a medication regimen of some kind, usually glucosamine, Rimadyl and Tramadol.

Some dogs do well on these medications; others either need additional help with pain or have difficulty with these



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drugs. It has been reported from all of my clients that the addition of massage therapy has allowed their dog to have increased range of motion, mobility and has even allowed them to cut back on medications.

Additionally, massage therapy for senior dogs can be an effective form of palliative care. When there is nothing further medically that can be done for the dog, it makes the caregiver feel much better to know that the dog is still able to receive the comfort and pain relief that comes from getting a good massage.

Dogs participating in sports such as agility, flyball and lure coursing can benefit from massage in the same way that human athletes benefit. Sore, overworked muscles take much longer to recover and can be subject to injury. Massage before or after an event can help the animal perform better as well as recover much quicker after an event.

Depending on the background and competency level of the therapist, you might offer post-surgical massage for patients coming out of anesthesia or to help calm an animal before a medical procedure.

The way to integrate complementary and alternative medicine into a practice is limited only by your imagination and your resources.

Insurance coverage for alternative therapies

Many animal health insurance companies seem to be sorting out what and how this coverage is going to work. Because CAM is still so new to the animal world, insurance companies have not really addressed what they will cover.

This is similar to what happened in the human world 20 years ago. I can remember calling Blue Cross to see if massage would be covered for a back injury incurred in a car accident. After putting me on hold several times, the claims agent assured me it would be covered as long as the work was done by a physical therapist.

She clearly didn't get it. When I have inquired about the coverage of alternative therapies for dogs, the agents I have spoken with have explained to me that their policies are purchased in tiers or levels, the most expensive being the "gold" level.

When the client purchases coverage at this level and completes the copay obligation, the company doesn't seem to mind what type of treatment is done for the animal, up to the maximum amount set for that tier. At this time I would recommend to anyone seeking coverage of this type to thoroughly research the company, read policies carefully—including any fine print—and ask a lot of specific questions of an agent before making a purchase.

The medical paradigm is shifting in both human and veterinary medicine. Ultimately, the patient is the one who benefits from the model of blending the best of all health care modalities in order to achieve the most successful outcome for the patient. ■

Shelley Sheets is a certified massage therapist and bodyworker, licensed in the state of Colorado. She is also a certified canine and equine massage therapist and instructor, and a Reiki Master teacher. Her website is Everybody-Massage-Therapy.abmp.com.