

in my experience

Helping Hands

by Shelley Sheets

Massage—it's not just for humans.

In the past few years, I've migrated my work from human massage therapy into that of an animal massage therapist.

After receiving my bachelor's degree in education, I practiced human massage therapy for 20 years. During that time, I also taught massage therapy for the Community College of Denver and wrote a massage therapy program for Arapahoe Community College and Denver Career College.

My massage experience has taken me from working with spinal cord and traumatic brain injury patients at Craig Hospital in Denver to owning a day spa in Littleton, Colo.

I grew up around horses and dogs, and have always loved animals. Combining my massage work with my love for animals seemed like a natural fit.

The training program

To that end, I went through a continuing education program, Medical Massage for Animals. It is a canine massage training program taught at Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins.

At that time, the program was open only to veterinarians, veterinary students, certified veterinary technicians, certified canine rehabilitators who are also licensed physical therapists and certified massage therapists. There were about 30 people in the program, from a variety of backgrounds and locations.

The curriculum was heavily weighted on anatomy and physiology, assessment and gait analysis, combined with palpation of muscles and massage techniques.

CSU describes the 80-hour, hands-on course as among the first in the nation to emphasize massage performed with the intent of improving conditions or diseases that have been diagnosed by a

veterinarian. The course was a success, and is still offered at the university.

After completing my work at CSU, I received further training and certification through the Rocky Mountain School of Animal Acupressure and Massage (RMSAAM).

Their program is approved and regulated by the Colorado Department of Higher Education and approved by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork as a continuing education approved provider. I've since written curriculum for RMSAAM and periodically teach at the school.

Now, equipped with this excellent training, I provide animal massage therapy in a dedicated space in my own home, as well as at pet owners' homes and at a canine training center in Wheat Ridge, Colo.

I typically travel to pet owners' homes; I have found that the animals tend to be more comfortable in their own space.

The work

I perform massage on canines, in a variety of situations and for a variety of conditions. While it seems that every human out there has a massage therapist, it's not so widespread in the animal world.

Even so, there are many animal owners willing to spend the time, effort and money for massage care. It's more of a common practice in the horse world—there, people spend millions of dollars on race and show horses, and they don't think twice about spending money on rehabilitation from injuries and surgery.

A number of canine breeds experience hip dysplasia issues. They may have had

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dysplasia since they were puppies, but now, at 100-plus pounds, they may be experiencing difficulty with mobility.

I may visit these animals as much as twice a week to massage their hips and back so they can get up and walk around. This work can help the owner decide whether to keep the animal going or not. While not as common as human surgeries, canine hip replacements are performed in increasing numbers.

My massage techniques don't take the place of physical therapy for these animals, but rather complement the restorative work of the therapy.

I work a great deal with senior dogs; they often suffer from arthritis and are not able to move around easily. I can say that every animal I have worked with has made some sort of improvement.

Hospice care is another aspect of my massage work. Easing the pain for an

animal that is nearing its final days can also help the owner come to terms with the impending end of life.

A growing segment in my work is sports dogs; those that participate in fly ball and agility courses often experience jumping and shoulder issues. I follow sports massage protocols to help them recover quickly after intense sports events.

Learning to read animal cues

I have learned to be conscious of animal behavior and to pay attention to the cues animals give me when I'm performing massage. They do let you know what they are thinking and feeling—you just have to understand how they say it.

When you hit a sore spot, they let you know. Obviously, animals use body language rather than verbal language, as a human would. It's funny, but most

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Colorado State University describes its Medical Massage for Animals course as among the first in the nation to emphasize massage performed with the intent of improving conditions or diseases that have been diagnosed by a veterinarian.

people won't tell you how they are feeling during a massage; I've known people who said afterwards they were in pain while receiving a massage.

In comparison, an animal will let you know right away—you just have to get good at reading those cues. I have found that kind of awareness has become much more acute as I have worked with animals. Working with people, many of them wanted deep pressure massage. Animals are much more sensitive. They don't want deep work; they simply relax into it. Humans are always thinking during massage, while animals take everything in—they don't have those same barriers as humans.

Work is well received

My clients come to me in all manner of ways. With the years I have spent working with animals and volunteering with a retriever rescue facility in Colorado and an animal sanctuary in Utah, I've developed a network of veterinarians that know and trust my work.

Often, the veterinarians tell me that they understand the importance of the work I do. It's to their advantage to have somebody like me connected to their practice, allowing them to continue to do the work they do.

I am a teacher assistant in the massage class each year at CSU, and there I get to meet veterinarians. They see that I have studied animal anatomy and understand that I do have credibility. Some of them are turning to a more holistic practice,

but may not have a quiet space to do this kind of work, so they want someone they can refer clients to.

I also garner clients through word of mouth from people who have used me. Mine is not the kind of service you look up in the Yellow Pages—for everyone's comfort level, it seems important to use someone they know or were referred to. Depending on the animal and the situation, my work may be covered by insurance, and my rates are in the same ballpark as those for human massage.

I've partnered with CSU's Narda Robinson to write a textbook for veterinarians, tentatively titled *Canine Medical Massage*. It will be published by AAHA Press in 2014.

Robinson, DO, DVM, MS, DABMA, FAAMA, has a long list of credentials;. She is director of the CSU Center for Comparative and Integrative Pain Medicine, assistant professor at the university's Department of Clinical Sciences, and founder and director of the school's Medical Acupuncture for Veterinarians program.

It's gratifying that I can combine my teaching skills, my love of animals and my knowledge of massage to bring comfort and healing to the animals I work with. ■

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.