

New-age medicine for pets

BY JANET DOUGLAS - US News

Bear sits quietly at his owner's feet, ears pricked, large black eyes peering out through a mass of white hair. The West Highland terrier is waiting for the veterinarian, but his surroundings do little to suggest that. The floors of the examining room are carpeted, elegant drapes frame the windows, and classical music plays softly. At Monique Maniet's Veterinary Holistic Care clinic in Bethesda, Md., the atmosphere is part of the cure.

Like many other vets around the country, Maniet has turned to alternative healing as an adjunct to traditional medicine. She uses acupuncture, herbal medicine, homeopathy (treatment using extremely dilute solutions), and chiropractic manipulation. Veterinarians may treat a flea-ridden cat with garlic instead of flea spray, an arthritic dog with acupuncture rather than painkillers.

No one knows how many practitioners are adopting alternative techniques, but the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association claims the field is expanding rapidly. Reliable evidence that alternative veterinary medicine actually works, however, is in short supply. Acupuncture is by far the best substantiated method. The new breed of vets say it is successful for conditions as diverse as back pain in horses and epilepsy in dogs. It was the only technique fully accepted by the American Veterinary Medical Association in its 1996 guidelines for veterinarians on the use of alternative treatments. The guidelines also state that chiropractic manipulation "can be" and homeopathy "may be" beneficial, but the AVMA called for more research into these and other treatments. Among the veterinary schools responding to that call is the University of Guelph in Canada, where two herbal treatments for arthritis in dogs are under study.

Looking for cures. Many vets who turn to alternative treatments say they do so out of frustration with the conventional medicine they were taught. Monique Maniet, for example, became disheartened by her inability to cure animals with chronic ailments like allergies and arthritis. Year after year, the same pets would appear in her examining room, their conditions slowly deteriorating. She almost switched careers, but having seen homeopathy succeed where conventional treatment had failed in her own family, she decided to try weaving alternative treatments into her practice. Now, having attended courses in the use of veterinary acupuncture, homeopathy, and Chinese herbs, she says she is better able not only to treat her patients but to prevent many of them from getting sick in the first place. Like many other alternative practitioners, Maniet blames poor nutrition and overvaccination, which weaken an animal, for many of the chronic diseases she sees--a view that, to a more limited extent, is shared by some conventional vets.

Owners, too, may turn to alternative medicine out of frustration. Dawn Bowman's 7-year-old crossbred German shepherd, Buddy, had endured months of treatment, including surgery, for a neurological condition that made urination difficult without the aid of a catheter. With little hope of a conventional cure in sight, the specialist gave Dawn two choices: Try acupuncture or euthanize the dog. With a bladder that "filled his abdomen," Buddy arrived at Maniet's door. The dog's bladder gradually shrank after twice-weekly acupuncture treatments, which were then tapered off as he regained urinary control. Almost a year later, Buddy is back to normal. The grateful Bowman says she would turn to acupuncture for herself.

Hundreds of vets have been certified in a variety of alternative therapies, although these qualifications are not officially recognized by the AVMA. But as such therapies gain in popularity, people without formal veterinary training are using them on pets. In one case, a dog owner without veterinary training prescribed herbs and homeopathy for a Labrador retriever that was vomiting repeatedly. The cause, an infected uterus, was not detected. By the time the owner finally sought out a veterinarian, the dog was beyond help. To safeguard your pet, say

veterinarians, learn about the treatment you're considering and check that the practitioner holds credentials, which demonstrate education and experience in the technique.