

Holistic Pet Care

At a year of age, Elsa was a bright, active Sheltie with a promising future in the show ring and agility course. However, all the big plans were put on hold when she came up lame and stiff in the rear a month after her first birthday. Initially her guardian, Lynn, thought she must have injured herself. Her veterinarian concurred and prescribed anti-inflammatory medication. The drug seemed to help temporarily but the symptoms soon recurred and Lynn and her husband Tom became more troubled.

The couple was referred to an orthopedic expert who took X-rays of Elsa's back. There appeared to be instability where the lower spine meets the sacrum. Cortisone was prescribed but instead of improving, Elsa got worse. Two weeks later the veterinarian repeated the spinal X-rays and discovered that there was an area of the sacrum where the bone was eroded away. It literally looked as if someone had drilled a hole into Elsa's sacrum.

Finally, six weeks after the initial symptoms, Tom and Lynn had their answer. Unfortunately, Elsa was diagnosed with discospondylitis – a serious, deep bone infection of the spine. This rather rare condition is caused when bacteria enter the blood stream and lodge in a bone of the spine. In Elsa's case it is surmised that the discospondylitis stemmed from a bladder infection she had as a puppy. The veterinarian gave a guarded prognosis and prescribed a long course of antibiotics for Elsa.

Lynn and Tom were upset and concerned by the whole ordeal. They truly love their pets as part of the family and wanted to do everything they could to help Elsa. The couple decided not to leave the fate of their beloved companion solely in the hands of conventional medicine. After researching alternatives and speaking with others in their Sheltie club, they brought Elsa to see me. I am a holistic veterinarian, one of a new breed in the veterinary community.

I received my veterinary degree from Ohio State University in 1987. After being in practice for several years, I began to feel discouraged by the limitations of conventional veterinary medicine and sought to broaden my training beyond traditional approaches. This led me to the acupuncture course offered by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS). After receiving IVAS certification in 1995, I further expanded my knowledge by attending continuing education courses on clinical nutrition and homeopathy. I also earned certified in animal chiropractic and veterinary Chinese herbal medicine.

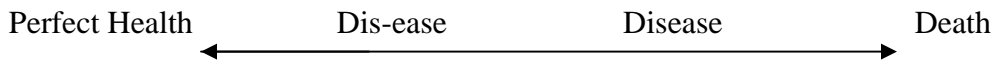
Holistic veterinary services are in demand these days because the use of holistic methods is becoming more and more popular in the United States. A 2001 Harvard Medical School study showed that 67.6% of US adults have used complementary and alternative (CAM) therapies at some time in their lives. Yes, alternative medicine has officially gone mainstream. Now holistically-minded pet guardians are seeking natural therapies for their four-legged companions. So why has holistic medicine gained in popularity lately and what is meant by holistic pet care?

The term "holistic" implies that the entire being, body, mind and spirit, is being addressed. The whole is considered to be greater than the sum of its parts. This concept stands in direct opposition to the Western reductionistic view of life. Modern medicine tends to break systems down into smaller and smaller pieces, reducing them to their basic building blocks to gain an understanding. The difference between the holistic and

Western approaches can be illustrated by my experience as a freshman in veterinary school.

The first class we budding animal doctors faced was anatomy lab. In this class, we dissected the bodies of our canine cadavers down to the minutest detail to see just how the biologic machine worked, like a mechanic taking apart a car engine in search of the oil leak. By the end of the semester, it was difficult to distinguish what species we had started with. I learned a lot about the parts of the body but lost an appreciation for what it would have been like to run with this pup or to snuggle up with him on a crisp, spring morning. Furthermore, I never witnessed anyone put all the pieces back together to re-form the original, living dog. That's because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Holistic medicine takes many forms, but there are common beliefs among these various techniques. First of all, health is considered to be more than simply the absence of disease. It is a state of well-being expressed as a vitality that resists disease. Health is a dynamic balance of internal and external forces. From this point of view, there is a broad spectrum of physical conditions ranging from perfect health to death.



Dis-ease begins as an imbalance, which may go undetected by conventional means. If left untreated at this early stage, detectable disease and possibly death will eventually result.

Have you ever had the experience of taking your pet to the veterinarian because he is not acting right only to be told after a battery of tests that there is nothing wrong? If your pet is having even mild symptoms, you know there is something wrong. The problem is that conventional testing and conventional wisdom does not recognize the disturbance until it becomes more serious. For example, blood tests can not detect kidney disease until 75% of the kidney function is destroyed. Most holistic approaches have ways of diagnosing and treating the imbalance before it develops into disease.

From the holistic point of view, symptoms are seen as the body's attempt to maintain balance or as an alert that there is a problem. Therefore, symptoms are not the enemy to be attacked. For example, when an animal has pain, it is a warning that something is wrong and needs to be addressed. This is like when the "check engine" light comes on in a car. Simply giving pain medication to such a pet is akin to putting a piece of electrical tape over the warning light. It looks like the problem is solved but if the real issue is not addressed, there could be dire consequences. Looking at disease holistically means looking beyond the symptoms to the cause of the problem.

At the risk of sounding like a car mechanic myself, here is another automobile analogy. A car with a flat tire needs to have it fixed. However, if poor driving habits caused the flat, then just patching the hole will not solve the problem for long. Holistic treatment of a patient is centered on such things as lifestyle, a sensible vaccination protocol, and natural nutrition. Rather than expecting the doctor to fix the problem, the animal caregiver plays an integral role in the pet's health care.

Holistic therapies embrace the vitalist concept that has been abandoned by conventional medicine. The vitalists believe that there is more to the body than meets the

eye. There is a vital energy that animates the flesh. The Chinese call it “Qi,” the Japanese call it “Ki,” the doctors of India call it “Prana,” homeopaths call it the “Vital Force,” and chiropractors call it the “Innate.” It is this life force energy that is the difference between life and death, and it must be nourished to maintain true health.

Holistic therapies generally strengthen the body where as conventional medicine fights disease. The body is viewed as containing its own pharmacy. Research bears this fact out. You may have heard of the placebo effect. This medical anomaly predicts that 30% of subjects treated with a sugar pill will improve ... no matter what the disease is. High blood pressure, low blood pressure, allergies - all can be alleviated by the patients' own bodies. It is considered a case of mind over matter but it proves that our bodies can heal themselves if conditions are right. The idea of holistic therapies is to produce the right conditions for true health.

Of course, fighting disease and strengthening the body are not mutually exclusive approaches to health. For me, holistic pet care embraces the best of what each has to offer. This concept is referred to as integrative medicine. There are some cases for which surgery or antibiotics may be the best option. At the same time acupuncture, chiropractic, herbs or nutritional supplements may be used to speed healing and strengthen the animal's constitution.

As for Elsa, after an hour-long holistic exam involving a detailed analysis of Elsa's medical history, X-rays, some holistic diagnostic techniques and a discussion with Lynn, we decided to help the ailing pet by continuing the antibiotic therapy to kill the bacteria, and adding acupuncture and chiropractic to the treatment plan. Acupuncture helps with pain but can also increase the antibiotic-carrying blood flow to the diseased bone and improve Elsa's immune system. Chiropractic is an excellent way to ease back pain and simultaneously it promotes the proper functioning of the spinal cord and nerves.

Both Tom and Lynn noticed an immediate improvement in Elsa's comfort and gait after the first treatment. So far, follow-up exams with the orthopedic



veterinarian have been equally promising. Elsa is ahead of schedule in healing her condition and the expert was surprised by how quickly her sacrum improved on X-rays. The integrative approach is not a cure-all, but it only makes sense to use every tool possible when faced with any health condition, especially a serious one like Elsa's. Plus, many holistic treatments can help apparently healthy athletes perform better.

There are many holistic therapies available for pets. It is best that any alternative treatment be administered by a properly trained veterinarian. Such a professional is not only thoroughly familiar with unique aspects of animal physiology and disease, he or she is also an expert in which holistic treatments would be the most appropriate for a given patient. For more information on holistic pet care or to find a local holistic veterinarian

contact the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association at 410-569-0795 or check out their website at www.ahvma.org.