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Alternatively Speaking: More Tools for Better Success Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

Earlier this spring I needed to cut a board to finish the last of my raised beds for my little garden. My husband, who is the official handyman of the family, was not around so I decided to do it myself. As I sawed away, the wood kept moving and my progress was slow and frustrating. In the end I managed to make a somewhat crooked cut, which turned out to be not quite the right length, but was good enough. Later at dinner he commented that if I had used a clamp to hold the board and a different technique to measure my cut things would have went easier, come out better and I would not be nursing a blister.

Of course we all know the sayings “the right tool for the job” and “if the only tool you have is a hammer you tend to see every problem as a nail”. It made me think about my practice of medicine. When I practiced only conventional medicine, the medical approach was thorough, but limiting. The tools for evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment were all designed to fit this system of medicine. Any patient whose disease did not fit into this system was left with little options. But medical traditions have existed for centuries before the birth of modern medicine. The fact that they were developed through observation and trial and error and not in a laboratory, does not detract from the knowledge these medical systems generated, and still today they provide tools for assessment and treatment that we can use to help our patients.

A good example of this is little “Teala”, who came to our practice in 2013 when she was 6 years old. Teala was an adorable and very sweet-natured little Chihuahua who lived with a loving human family along with her two puppies, now grown. Teala had started vomiting many times a day and was very dehydrated and weak. Her regular veterinarian identified liver and kidney disease, possibly from an infection or toxin, however the cause was not clear. Further testing to try to get a specific diagnosis was not possible and neither was the level of hospitalization her condition required. Her condition was grave, but her owners were devoted to her and did not want to lose her at such a young age. Her veterinarian gave fluids and medications to help with nausea and infection. The drugs had mostly stopped the vomiting but she was still not doing well at all. From a Western perspective, her blood values were life threatening and without more tests or more aggressive intervention, her chances were slim.

Teala was initially seen by my colleague, Dr. Black, five days later. Her kidneys were not working properly and the waste products in her blood were 7 – 10 times over the normal limit, which was starting to damage her body. Her tongue was raw with ulcers, she was very weak, thin, and eating and drinking very little. Despite being so ill, neither Teala nor her family were ready to give up. Knowing that with this level of kidney damage there was not much hope with full Western tests and therapies, Dr Black used other tools to assess and treat Teala.

Teala needed help for her damaged organs, but she had to eat in order to survive and to take in medicine. So Dr Black used a combination approach or integrative therapy. Teala continued on Western medicines for nausea, hydrating fluids, antibiotics and antacids for the heartburn caused by kidney failure. Added to this was a nutritional support to provide whole food nutrients to the kidneys, which contained the specific vitamins, minerals and enzymes needed by that organ weakened by disease. Western medicine often ignores the greatest tool we have to help our bodies fight disease – nutrition. In my opinion, nutritional therapy is best done using whole foods in supplements, raw feeding or fresh homemade diets.

After 24 hours on this new combination, Teala began to eat a little more. After 3 days she was still very weak and wobbling around, but feeling a bit better and continuing to eat. Her kidney values were still very high, but had come down significantly. Dr Black was still concerned about Teala's condition because her waste levels were still too high for her little body to tolerate. At this point I was consulted to evaluate Teala from a Chinese medical perspective, which would allow us to access another set of therapeutic tools.

Traditional Chinese Medicine is one of the most documented ancient medical practices, with texts on the Chinese explanation of physiology, identification of disease patterns, and formularies of herbal treatments dating back to 2000 BC. Using this method, the way we interpret exam findings are designed to fit the Chinese medical system and therefore generate totally different ideas about what is going wrong in the body. Interpreting the problem from this different perspective not only gives us the treatment tools of acupuncture and herbs, but gives us clues for what Western therapies may work alongside for maximum success. The formula we chose for Teala fit her Chinese diagnosis, but also we know that the actions of the plants in this formula include treatment of acute inflammatory damage to the kidney and liver. It is a formula being studied extensively for its success in treating a number of conditions in people.

Nearly two weeks later, Teala was really starting to feel better. She was not vomiting, drinking well on her own, and playing with her pups again. As her kidney values improved she was weaned off her Western medications. Dr Black added in more nutritional supports for her liver and kidneys, and her owners faithfully provided a massage whenever Teala asked. Almost 2 months after becoming ill, Teala was back to her normal self. She was eating a home cooked diet, was drinking normally, and had gained weight. Her blood values were still elevated but far better at only twice normal values. Over the next year, Teala continued to feel and act like a normal dog. To this day she is maintained on nutritional supports for her liver and kidneys, is on a home cooked diet, and Chinese herbs. She has no outward symptoms of any kidney damage and her values are checked at least twice a year and continue to remain at or near normal.

Teala is just one example of how powerful our bodies can be at recovering from illness, given the support and time to allow them to. In cases so severe as this, it also is an example of the need to utilize all the knowledge, modern and ancient, to help treat our patients. Integrating different medical approaches gives us opportunities to examine the patient using different yardsticks, which in turn gives us more tools for treatment should the conventional approach not provide the answers we need.

I think we can all appreciate that for any job, having the correct tools, and the knowledge of how to use them, makes all the difference. I can think of countless times in my life that I have appreciated how much more I could do with better quality tools – the sturdier quality sewing machine, the brighter headlamp for camping... and every day that I practice medicine I am so very thankful for the additional “tools” alternative medicine gives us to help our patients.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseanimalhospital.com