



Chelsea Animal Hospital Inc.

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Alternatively Speaking: Veterinary Chiropractic Care
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Of all the many types of holistic care, I think Acupuncture and Chiropractic are the most widely recognized. Most people are aware of these therapies for people and their pets, and they have become main-stream enough to be covered by many insurance policies. Despite this familiarity, most people do not realize the deeper potential for chiropractic treatment to help restore balance, beyond just fixing athletic injuries. I personally do not practice Chiropractic care, my area of study is acupuncture and Chinese herbs. But I certainly have experienced its effects first hand and know how well it pairs with acupuncture. So I sat down with Dr Will Barry, who provides Chiropractic therapy at our practice, to talk about how these two therapies work together to provide solutions to some pretty stuck problems.

Most people's basic understanding of chiropractic therapy is just that – moving stuck bones. The spine is made up of many tiny bones called vertebrae which allow it to twist and flex in many directions. If that motion is prevented then the attached muscles and tendons are pulled and held too tight, limiting the body's motion locally so other parts have to move in abnormal ways to perform simple tasks like walking or bending. This unusual use strains muscles so that they are more prone to injury, and before you know it one tiny stuck vertebra is causing aches and pains all over, even affecting internal functions. The chiropractor manipulates the body to unlock the bones so they move again, and in doing so that relaxes overstretched areas and allows normal flexibility so everything can heal.

At least that is the plan. But as Dr Barry says, "Bones are stupid, they just do what the muscles tell them to." Moving the bones may not help much if the muscles are just going to pull them back into a fixed place. What controls the muscles? Nerves! Painful feed-back from nerves can tell the muscles to hold bones still to protect an injury, like a disc in the back that is slipping out of place. Suddenly moving the bone may aggravate that primary injury. Nerves are an important part of what makes up an acupuncture point so it is no surprise that when trying to work with muscles and bones, chiropractic and acupuncture work well together. Once you start affecting nerves, whether with needles or by releasing bones, then you are also influencing body systems and organs on every level. Mobility is at the heart of health, but is not limited to just moving limbs. There is physiologic movement in the body such as digestion in the gut, circulatory movement of blood in tissues, or metabolic 'movement' in organs and cells and they are not independent of our bodies physical motion. This is why these therapies have such broad impact beyond orthopedic aches and pains.

But often a pet's symptoms do involve an ache or pain, and while we have these tools to use, it may not be easy to find the source of the problem at first glance. Take Jack for instance, an elderly but very energetic, bouncy dog with a history of back issues and fairly dramatic arthritis changes along his spine. As he has aged he has needed some medication on occasion for back pain, but otherwise had been doing well. Then after a fall last December he started walking hunched, with his rear legs crouched in a half-sitting position all the time. Were his legs weak and unable to hold him up, or did he slip a disc and have too much pain to straighten his back, or did he pull some support muscles trying to walk with a sore back? Is it the muscles, nerves, bones or a combination of all three?

Working out these puzzles is where each case always starts. A front leg limp may be due to leaning forward because there is pain in the rear. A sore back may be from walking shifted to the left because there is a sore knee on the right. So how do we know whether to use chiropractic or acupuncture, and how do we find the root problem? There are no wrong approaches, but Dr Barry and I agree that it starts with getting feedback from the body through touch, and often it is a combination of therapies that work the best. When doing an exam for acupuncture, I feel for heat or changes in the tissues where acupuncture points are located to narrow down where the problem areas are. Acupuncture works on the soft tissues and organs via their neurological controls, when needles stimulate nerves and send messages locally as well as far reaching thru the body. In this way it can

provide pain relief, move circulation to or away from a tissue that needs nourishing or decongesting, and it can allow tense muscles to relax so they are not pulling bones in ways that diminish their mobility. On a deeper level, it may address imbalances that made the body prone to injury.

Dr Barry also uses his hands to feel for problems. Before working on the bones, he checks the muscles from head to toe, feeling for tension or pain. He also uses Applied Kinesiology, also known as muscle testing, to determine weakness. His assistant touches the pet and when a weak area is identified, that weakness briefly reflects in the assistant. There are different ways to measure this, but commonly the tester pushes on the assistant's out stretched arm. Normally a person can hold up their arm when pressure is applied, but it is quite impressive to see that arm drop as if it had no strength at all, and only when the patient's weak area is being checked. This can identify muscles to treat with acupuncture or laser. Lasers relax the muscles by their action on the cells themselves to increase oxygen, which affects local circulation and relieves pain. Dr Barry then repeats his exam from tail to head, this time checking the bones. If any bone is still fixed after the muscles have been helped, then he will use Chiropractic to address the bones. Chiropractic manipulation can involve forceful jolts to bones, but often we use only small vibrations to get the same effect. This technique is gentle and can avoid aggravating sore areas, especially when we relax problem muscles first. Doing so makes it less likely to be uncomfortable after chiropractic treatment while strained muscles are readjusting to normal motion.

Let's go back to Jack, who came to us for help with his hunched back. We started with a conventional exam, and determined he was not weak in his rear legs, or having abdominal pain. We then did a Chinese exam, to see what imbalances may be contributing to such a fixed pain that would not budge. He had several acupuncture treatments, and we adjusted his current medications. Over time he did seem more comfortable and happy but we were not making much progress in getting his back to straighten, and his activity was affected by that. So we decided to have Dr Barry do a chiropractic assessment. Given the fragile condition of Jack's back, we wanted to use very gentle manipulations under a veterinarian's supervision. At the time of this article, it is too early to say how things are going, but the treatment was painless and did not aggravate his condition, which is always our first goal.

Jack's case can also remind us how good our pets are at hiding their problems. He is not unique in the fact that until he was older, he seemed pretty normal despite still having significant back disease. Remember that compared to us, our pet's pain has to be much more intense for them to show it in an obvious way. They are built to hunt first and rest sore bodies later, so given the opportunity to play ball or chase a squirrel, a sore leg may suddenly feel just fine. That means we have to watch for early clues of mild pain and get them checked out. Early on, there will be no moaning or groaning from our pets, they will simply adjust what they do or how they do it to be most comfortable and carry on merrily. As in all disease, diagnosing and treating early gets the best results because we can minimize chronic damage and prolong normal function. If we wait until there is enough pain for our pet to show it clearly, the more likely that tissue damage is significant and is involving many structures. That means treatment takes longer to work and may be more difficult to improve function.

So if your cat is using the chair before getting up onto the counter to steal your tuna, or your dog takes a few steps to get going right after a nap, don't wait for things to get more dramatic. Have your pet evaluated medically by your veterinarian to first rule out any conditions that may be connected to their change in behavior. They may have a problem that needs immediate attention other than chiropractic, or treatment before chiropractic to avoid aggravating an unstable situation. If it turns out to be a simple ache or pain, get those muscles and bones checked out to find the culprit. It may be a simple injury that needs acupuncture or chiropractic to reset things, or it may be an ongoing joint or structural issue that would benefit from broader alternative care including tissue support supplements, nutritional support, and knowing what activities to promote or avoid. Either way, a little early intervention goes a long way to keep your pet flexible and moving so they feel their best inside and out.

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.chelseaanimalhospital.com