Keeping the whole rabbit healthy
Former “alternative” therapies go mainstream as medical treatments expand

When it comes to health care, society seems to be changing. Even though it has been used in China for thousands of years, just a few years ago in the U.S., acupuncture would have been seen as far outside mainstream treatment. Today some traditional medical and dental practices incorporate acupuncture to address patient health, increase patient comfort and speed healing. Just as some people may explore non-traditional treatments to address their long-term physical and emotional health, so too can these therapies be applied to animal health care.

What is Integrative Medicine?
By Guin Boostrom
This issue of the Rabbit Advocate explores integrative medicine as applied to the healthcare of our furry friends. Which begs the question, what is integrative medicine, anyway? Integrative medicine is described as taking the best of alternative therapies, those that have been scientifically proven, and using them in conjunction with more conventional medicine to facilitate healing. Integrative medicine takes into account the mental as well as physical aspects of well-being and aims to treat the patient as a whole. And importantly, integrative medicine looks at all modes of treatment, both conventional and alternative, critically. Integrative medicine rejects both the notion that only western, conventional, evidence-based medicine can cure illness, but it also rejects the notion that alternative treatments are always better because they are less invasive or more natural. For example, an integrative veterinary practitioner might recognize that using something like manuka honey as a topical antibacterial agent on a skin wound is a great alternative to other types of ointments, but a significant abscess deep in the jaw may still be best treated with antibiotics and surgery.

With this issue of the Rabbit Advocate, we hope to educate our readers about some of the alternative therapies that are available for treating their companion animals. The information presented here has been used by local veterinarians, whose experience is recounted in the articles that follow. It is critically important to seek the advice of a rabbit savvy veterinarian for any injury or illness your rabbit may contract. While some alternative therapies can be quite beneficial, they should never take the place of regular veterinary care. Additionally, you would always want to discuss any alternative therapies you are using with your veterinarian to be sure that none of the therapies you are using (for example, medicinal herbs) will interfere with any medications your pet takes.

Sometimes the term “holistic medicine” is used to describe therapies to address health. The idea behind a “holistic” course of treatment is to look at the patient (whether human or animal) as a whole

continued on page 2
Veterinary Acupuncture: An Overview
By Sarah Yasutake

Acupuncture is an ancient practice that derives from traditional Chinese medicine. In acupuncture, thin needles are inserted at particular points on the body to regulate the flow of “Chi” (natural energy) throughout the body’s tissues and organs. Chi runs through the body in river-like meridian channels. When the meridian channels become blocked, Chi can no longer flow freely, and organs and tissues are deprived of this vital energy. As a result of this obstruction, health disorders develop. The needling of acupuncture releases the obstruction so that the Chi can again flow freely, restoring health.

Acupuncture is used both to treat ailments and as a preventative medicine. It has been used in the veterinary setting in China for thousands of years, and it is becoming more common in veterinary practice all over the world. For veterinary acupuncture, most of the points and meridian channels have been transposed to animals from humans.

How does it work?
Although we don’t have a full understanding of the neurological and biochemical basis of acupuncture, MRI studies have shown that acupuncture brings about physiological changes in the central nervous system. In response to acupuncture needling, the muscles, spinal cord, and brain release chemicals that can change pain perception and affect organ function.

What conditions can acupuncture treat?
Evidence shows that acupuncture is effective for treating musculoskeletal, gastrointestinal, respiratory, skin, urinary, reproductive, neurological, and behavioral disorders. It is also an effective treatment for stress. For cancer patients, acupuncture can alleviate pain, fatigue, and gastrointestinal upset.

Side effects from acupuncture are minimal. Most animals will become relaxed during treatment, and some may even fall asleep.
What to expect at an integrative health care appointment  By Dr. Nell Ostermeier

Editor’s Note: Dr. Nell Ostermeier (she uses her first name rather than her last name and prefers to be called Dr. Nell) uses the term “integrative” in describing her medical practice and approach to health care. She believes this term captures the idea of modern Western medicine combined with natural options and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) approaches. She practices integrative health care at Lombard Animal Hospital in northeast Portland.

An Integrative Medicine Exam starts with the veterinary assistant, who lovingly guides you and your rabbit into the Integrative Medicine Room. The assistant will obtain a brief history regarding your rabbit’s main problems and get a current weight. The assistant hands this information to me then I gather a more detailed history and ask questions about the patient’s preferences and personality. Each little detail is important in making the Traditional Chinese Medicine diagnosis. All those funny little things your bunny does actually mean something in Chinese Medicine!

Next, a full physical exam is performed which usually includes: examining the skin, ears, eyes, nose and teeth, listening to the heart and lungs, gentle palpation (feeling) of the digestive and elimination systems, listening for gut sounds, checking for musculoskeletal discomfort and nervous system abnormalities. In addition, feeling pulse quality and observing the color and quality of the tongue are an important part of the TCM exam. All of this is done in a calm, compassionate way taking care not to stimulate your rabbit’s flight response. Once all of the information is gathered, I combine the findings to determine a TCM and Western diagnosis. Diagnostic and treatment options are based on this assessment and are focused on your pet’s condition and wellbeing.

Acupuncture is often recommended for the rabbit. At Lombard Animal Hospital, acupuncture is included as part of the exam. This is because almost every medical or emotional condition can be improved through the use of acupuncture. Some conditions that respond very well to acupuncture are: GI motility issues, rhinitis and sinusitis, tooth pain, arthritis, allergies, immune stimulation, general pain, stress and behavior problems.

Most rabbits are very receptive to acupuncture. The needle placement is not painful like receiving a shot because the needles are small and do not have a hollow core like needles for injections. Thus, they spread the skin and tissue rather than poke holes in it. They are applied at specific points along meridians (pathways) on the body and are meant to improve the flow of energy, relieve pain, and modify circulation. Typically, five to 10 needles are administered in the rabbit patient. They typically stay in place about 10 minutes and are then removed. In human acupuncture treatments, the needles may stay in place much longer. I have found that about 10-15 minutes is more ideal for the rabbits. Some patients have difficulty sitting still for that length of time. In those patients, I recommend the use of laser therapy to stimulate the points, dry needling (simply stimulating the point with the needle, without leaving it in place), or aquapressure (instilling a small bleb of Vitamin B12 into the acupuncture point). Depending on the rabbit’s ailment or imbalance, I may prescribe herbal treatments or nutritional therapy.

In my practice, I look at each patient as an individual and each body as a whole. I work to develop a treatment plan that can combine the best of both Western and Eastern Medicine. I see many patients just for acupuncture and alternative therapies, so that they can continue to see their regular veterinarian for Western diagnostics and treatment. I am happy to work in conjunction with other veterinarians and I respect the perspectives of others in my field. My primary motivation is the health of my animal patients.
Scientific examples of alternative therapies for companion animals

By Dr. Melinda Surrency, DVM

Editor’s Note: Dr. Melinda Surrency of the Hillsboro Veterinary Clinic is a member of the Rabbit Advocate Board of Directors. She compiled an exhaustive list of therapies that can be considered complements or alternatives to more traditional medical practices. Her list has been edited here. If you would like a copy of her original list of therapies and notes, please send an email to The Rabbit Advocate Editor at lbleakney@gmail.com.

Supplements

Dietary supplements can include things like glucosamine HCl (specifically supplements like Cosequin), Chondroitin, Dasuquin, Omega 3 fatty acids, l-carnitine and Coenzyme Q10.

Glucosamine HCl and Chondroitin sulfate

Glucosamine sulfate is a naturally occurring substance found in the fluid that surrounds joints. This supplement is commonly used to ease joint pain and stiffness, particularly in older pets. Most glucosamine found in supplements is harvested from shellfish. The exoskeletons are crushed and used to make the supplement. Additionally, it can be harvested from certain grains or even synthesized in a lab. Glucosamine may either increase the cartilage and fluid surrounding the joints, or help prevent breakdown of these substances, or perhaps both. It is often taken along with chondroitin sulfate.

Chondroitin sulfate is a substance found in connective tissue like cartilage, and is also found in the cornea which is an integral part of the eye. Chondroitin sulfate is the building blocks of cartilage, so taking this in a supplement may slow the breakdown seen in processes such as osteoarthritis. If chondroitin is used in a supplement, it MUST be low-molecular weight, otherwise it cannot be absorbed by the digestive tract.

Another important factor in the efficacy of these supplements (Cosequin DS in particular) is that manganese should be somewhere in the mix. Manganese acts as a catalyst to activate the glucosamine and chondroitin.

The good news is when glucosamine HCl, low-molecular weight chondroitin sulfate and manganese are combined, we see statistically significant improvement in cartilage and joint movement when the supplements are taken together for at least a month’s time. This supplement combination also has a preventative effect to joints. Dogs given Cosequin prior to a joint surgery recovered from the surgery faster than those who had not been given the supplements prior to the surgery.

It is important to state that not all supplements are equal. In the veterinary world, Cosequin DS is the one supplement that actually has several well-performed studies to support its efficacy.

Acupuncture

The basis of acupuncture is to stimulate specific acupuncture points in the body to restore the flow of qi through meridians. It is not based upon scientific knowledge and its efficacy is variable. Typically, it is used for analgesia (pain relief) and is usually used as an adjunct to other treatments.

There is limited data of the effect of acupuncture on dogs, but a small handful of studies showed that it is equivalent to dogs on morphine after one type of orthopedic surgery called a tibial plateau leveling osteotomy (TPLO). This surgery is analogous to repairing an anterior cruciate ligament in humans. Two studies showed that dogs with spinal disc disease did better with acupuncture alone as compared to surgery alone or surgery and acupuncture together.

A study in rabbits showed that stimulation of certain acupuncture points caused an increase in serotonin levels of the brain. Another study seemed to conclude that acupuncture did provide pain relief for rabbits.

Honey for the treatment of wounds and burns

For several decades throughout the world, honey has been used as a treatment for infected wounds and burns. Many articles and studies have been published discussing its efficacy.

Honey provides a moist healing environment, clears infection due to natural antibacterial activity, deodorizes, reduces inflammation and edema and helps draw out wound fluid. Additionally, it increases the rate of healing by stimulating new blood vessels to grow towards the wound so new tissue and skin can begin growing.

The type of honey applied to the wound is important. In several studies that looked at types of honey, a type of honey from India, known as Kadhikraft had the greatest antibacterial activity...
Alternative therapies cont.

against Pseudomonas sp. bacteria. Pseudomonas is notorious for being very resistant to antibiotics and for infecting open wounds. Honey from the Leptospermum species (Manuka) is also known to have a uniquely high level of herbal antibacterial qualities. One factor that is important to consider is that there is a large variance in the level of antibacterial activity even within honeys from the same floral source.

As a veterinarian, I have treated a handful of cases with Manuka honey. Starting way back in vet school, there was a horse that had severe wounds all over her back and whithers from where a coyote had jumped on top of her back and had ripped into her skin. She had severe puncture wounds which unfortunately got infected and developed flystrike. Tissue from the entire area had to be removed. We knew that she was a candidate for skin grafts but this was not an option for the owner. We did honey bandages for 14 days and the healing was remarkable.

Another case involved was a guinea pig. I had removed a large mass from the guinea pig’s back. The mass was extremely large and although I got the wound closed with sutures, I had to make a releasing incision higher up to reduce some of the tension on the suture line. Tension is to be avoided at all costs as it will prevent proper healing and will result in the skin dying. Unfortunately, the skin had started to have issues due to the high tension and so we elected to try honey to help the wound heal more quickly. It worked amazingly well and in about 7-10 days the wound was on its way to healing completely.

Tellington TTouch® for Rabbits

By Guin Boostrom

Bodywork is a type of alternative therapy that typically uses movement (of the body, of the breath) to improve health, change behavior, and/or create an awareness of the mind-body connection. Yoga and massage are some types of bodywork with which most people are familiar. ‘Tellington Touch’ is a type of bodywork developed by Linda Tellington specifically for use in animals (although it can work on people, too). TTouch is comprised of gentle circular motions, slides and lifts that can calm animals, which can be used to enhance health and improve behavior training. It is easy to learn and can be done just about anywhere.

Because two of the main focuses of TTouch are calming animals and enhancing the trust bond between animal and human, TTouch is particularly effective with prey animals like rabbits. TTouch can help rabbits learn to associate touch from humans as being safe, non-constraining and soothing. This can help in a myriad of healthcare situations such as getting a rabbit to remain still for a nail trim or health exam, or acclimating a rabbit to being picked up in an emergency situation. A TTouch move that involves gently sliding the fingers from the base of a rabbit’s ear to the tip can be very effective at calming a stressed bunny who is going into shock either from emotional trauma (such as loss of a mate) or illness. Other TTouch movements that involve gentle lifts on the stomach can help provide supportive care (in addition to proper veterinary care) for GI stasis. As TTouch is gentle and non-invasive, it is typically a safe therapy to use on any rabbit as an adjunct to any number of other treatments.

An excellent summary of specific TTouch movements to use with rabbits can be found on The House Rabbit Society’s website (http://rabbit.org/tellington-ttouch-for-a-happy-and-healthy-rabbit/). More general information about TTouch, including where to find a TTouch training workshop can be found on the TTouch website (www.ttouch.com). Stories about using TTouch in rabbits have appeared in older issues of the Rabbit Advocate. To find back issues of The Rabbit Advocate, go to the website at www.rabbitadvocates.org.

In practice, I have used honey in two rabbits. One rabbit had a severe wound to the foot. I had surgically cleaned the wound and affected surrounding tissue, but as there is very little skin on the foot, I used honey bandages to help the wound granulate. After about two weeks, the foot was on its way to healing well.

Another case involved was a guinea pig. I had removed a large mass from the guinea pig’s back. The mass was extremely large and although I got the wound closed with sutures, I had to make a releasing incision higher up to reduce some of the tension on the suture line. Tension is to be avoided at all costs as it will prevent proper healing and will result in the skin dying. Unfortunately, the skin had started to have issues due to the high tension and so we elected to try honey to help the wound heal more quickly. It worked amazingly well and in about 7-10 days the wound was on its way to healing completely.

Thank You to Our Vets!

We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of the following veterinarians and staffs for their services to our rescued rabbits:

Dr. Katrina Ramsell
Northwest Exotic Pet Vet, and
Dr. Chris Wilson
Beaverton Pet Clinic, Beaverton

Dr. Mark Burgess
Southwest Animal Hospital, Beaverton

Dr. Sheri Schlorman
Creswell Veterinary Hospital, Creswell

Dr. Melinda Surrency
Hillsboro Veterinary Clinic, Hillsboro

Dr. Dougboro
Barclay Hills Animal Clinic, Oregon City

Dr. Nell Ostermeier
Lombard Animal Hospital, Portland

Dr. Mary Blankenvoort and
Dr. Peter Davis
St. Johns Veterinary Clinic, Portland

Dr. Rebecca Prull
NW Neighborhood Vet Hospital, Portland

Dr. Ken DeReamer
Dr. Monica Pollock
Paws and Claws Pet Medical Center, Troutdale and Peninsula Dog and Cat Clinic, Portland

Dr. Matt Fricke
McKenzie Animal Hospital, Springfield

We’d love to add more names to this list! Please call us at 503-617-1625 if you are a rabbit-savvy vet who is able to donate services to help rescued rabbits.
Mr. Fluffy

Mr. Fluffy is roughly 6 ½ years old and has been with me more than three years. He is a white male angora with a history of seizures who was advertised for sale on Craig’s List. Mr. Fluffy has suffered from back pain. When his back hurts, he doesn’t move freely. When he came to me it was clear that he wasn’t moving very much because he urinated on his feet and legs. This, of course, caused urine scald on his feet and legs, which burned his skin. The pain and stress of the burned skin then triggered seizures. To alleviate his back pain he initially received acupuncture from Dr. Nell Ostermeier of the Lombard Animal Hospital every three or four weeks. He also had laser therapy on his back and feet. He has been seizure free since starting on the Chinese herbal formula “Calm Repose” about 18 months ago. The herbs are meant to help him process stress so that he can avoid starting the seizure pattern in the first place. Today, he is much improved and his feet and legs are free of scald. The skin recovered nicely and he receives acupuncture every three months as maintenance.

Little Bunny Foo Foo

Little Bunny Foo Foo is about 3 ½ years old. He has been in my care about 3 years. He was surrendered to Rabbit Advocates by the Oregon Humane Society, because the severity of his dental disease required so much medical treatment that the shelter thought a foster home would be the best place for him. X-rays performed at the shelter’s medical treatment facility showed that basically, none of his teeth were normal. After he came to live with me, I adopted him; he is no longer considered to be in foster care.

Bunny Foo Foo suffered from malocclusion of his incisors. His front teeth basically jutted out of his mouth. He had surgery to remove his incisors, and several months after this surgery, we found a secondary infection. He suffered from dental abscesses and infected molars. His chronic dental disease and chronic sinus drainage and infection meant that he was unable to eat hay normally. He was on endless rounds of antibiotics. The antibiotics affected the flora in his gut, leading to chronic diarrhea as well. This is a rabbit that clearly needed extra help just to survive.

I sought that help through integrative therapy with Dr. Nell. When I first took him to Lombard Animal Hospital, he had not yet healed well from the surgeries and infection; tooth root matter and decayed fragments were found.

In an attempt to boost his immune system, he was given an initial round of vitamin B injections over the period of a couple of months.

To manage the chronic infection in his mouth he receives two different Chinese herbs to improve internal and external immunity. He takes the antibiotic Orbax seven days out of every 28 days to help keep the infection under control. He takes Cisapride twice daily to assist gut function. He eats Critical Care by syringe or in a dish mixed with water and ground alfalfa hay. In this way he is able to get the nutrients he needs.

Bunny Foo Foo has taken Metacam for pain and discomfort and Simethicone as needed for gas in his tummy. He receives acupuncture approximately every month to improve the circulation in his mouth and to assist in the function of his digestive system. He has not had an extraction or abscess since starting on this maintenance routine but Dr. Nell has sedated him to perform a deep flush of the surgery sites and to examine his mouth more closely than would be possible without sedation.

In general, because his eating and energy levels are very good, when he does experience periods of decreased eating, it means his mouth needs additional attention. My goals with treatment have been to reduce the number of surgeries, slow the progress of the infection and to give him the best quality of life that he can have. I believe the treatments he is receiving have been helpful and have improved his life.

~ By Paula Buchert
Laser therapy may speed healing, ease pain

When we think of lasers we think of beams of light that at one extreme can cut through metal and at the opposite extreme can be a plaything for a cat. But laser technology has changed and expanded to include many different applications in the medical field. Local veterinarians are finding low-level laser therapy to be helpful in treating all kinds of conditions, including pain management and recovery from surgeries.

This type of laser therapy is non-invasive, drug free and pain free. The treatment can reduce pain, inflammation and swelling. It can reduce healing time after surgery, requires no sedation or clipping away of hair to administer and only takes a few minutes at each site. Common treatments for the laser therapy include treatment of arthritis, post-surgical pain, other wounds or injuries and skin irritations.

Dr. Katrina Ramsell, NW Exotic Pet Vet, has used cold laser therapy on rabbit patients, and she finds it to be very helpful. "I think cold laser therapy is a valid and useful treatment for certain health issues in rabbits. I have seen it help arthritic rabbits, it is great for treating wounds and trauma, and it is helpful for a number of other things such as pododermatitis (sore hocks)," She recalls one rabbit patient in particular who suffered severe hind-end weakness. The rabbit’s condition and mobility was progressively worsening but her condition made significant improvement with the cold laser treatments.

Rabbit Advocate Volunteer Allison Brennan agrees that cold laser therapy is helpful. Her bunny Minnie is a three-pound rabbit that is 8 or 9 years old. Allison said she noticed that when Minnie sat, she held her back legs out at an odd angle. That strange posture soon worsened to her dragging her feet behind her when she moved. Allison said Minnie continued to move around and her appetite did not diminish. But it affected her ability to use her litter box. Allison feared Minnie was suffering discomfort.

Dr. Ramsell examined Minnie and X-rays showed arthritis in her spine. To treat Minnie’s discomfort, Allison began giving her the pain reliever and anti-inflammatory Metacam daily for a week or two. On its own, the Metacam seemed to make no difference in her ability to move. Together, Dr. Ramsell and Allison decided to add cold laser therapy to the arsenal of treatment.

Allison said she noticed no change after the first two treatments. But Minnie’s response after the third treatment is heartening. Minnie can now jump in and out of her litter box and run around her living area. Allison said her back legs are still out at a slightly odd angle, but it is much less noticeable. Currently, Minnie has had nine cold laser treatments. She continues to get Metacam every day. Allison believes the laser treatment, combined with the daily pain reliever, has helped Minnie regain a pain-free life.

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Dr. Katrina Ramsell, NW Exotic Pet Vet, practices at the Beaverton Pet Clinic, 11876 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway, Beaverton, Oregon. The phone number is (503) 646-6101.
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“Promoting the Welfare of Domestic Rabbits”

Upcoming Meetings & Events 2015

General Meetings

3rd Sunday of the month
3:30 pm – 5:30 pm
Location: Humane Society for Southwest Washington, 1100 NE 192nd Ave., Vancouver, WA
Meetings begin with a “Bunny Basics” Q & A session where we invite your questions about any aspect of rabbit care. The public is welcome!

2015 Dates
APR 19  JUL 12  OCT 11
MAY 17  AUG 9  NOV 8
JUN 21  SEP 13  DEC 13

*Rabbit Advocates will not be holding a monthly meeting during the months of July and August. Check our website for more information.

Find us on Facebook: Rabbit Advocates

Bunny’s Best Bites

Hay Packing Parties
Volunteers blend and bag different types of hay to create Bunny’s Best Bites, our own custom blend of hay. For more information about the hay parties, see the Rabbit Advocate website at www.rabbitadvocates.org

First Saturday of the month, 10 am – 2 pm
Please note, July’s date is the second Saturday.

2015 Dates
APR 4  JUL 11  OCT 3
MAY 2  AUG 1  NOV 7
JUN 6  SEP 5  DEC 5

Education & Adoption Outreaches

Rabbit Advocates sponsors educational events featuring adoptable foster rabbits along with tips on rabbit handling, diet, housing, health and general care. Experienced volunteers provide grooming and nail trimming services for rabbits (suggested donations of $5 for nail trims and $5 for light grooming are appreciated). Outreaches are held the second Sunday of each month from noon-3 pm at the Tigard Petco at 11705 SW Pacific Highway, Tigard, Oregon. For more information, see the Rabbit Advocate website at www.rabbitadvocates.org

2015 Dates
APR 12  JUL 12  OCT 11
MAY 10  AUG 9  NOV 8
JUN 14  SEP 13  DEC 13

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BUNNY PALOOZA
November 7, 2015

www.rabbitadvocates.org