

Improve The Quality of Life for Your Dog. Acupuncture: An Alternative More Vets Are Embracing. — by Pam Hogle

Shelby bounds up to the car to say hello. As soon as my Golden Retriever, **Jana**, and I get out, she play bows to Jana and greets me warmly, even though I am a total stranger. Shelby is a typically friendly, happy, social Golden Retriever. And, watching her roll on the grass, chase a ball, and cavort energetically as she invites Jana to join her games, you'd never guess that she's 15 years old.

Shelby's devoted caretaker, Paula Chapman, attributes the dog's quality of life to the regular acupuncture treatments Shelby has received for the last year and a half. Shelby has weakness in her right hind leg, Chapman explained, and the leg would slip, causing Shelby's foot to drag.

Chapman became aware of the problem during family outings. "We used to go hiking a lot, and that's where we first noticed it," Chapman said. "She gets worn out more easily. At first, we thought it was her age, but there's more to it than that." At the time, Chapman and her partner, Nicole, were living in Gainesville. Shelby was being treated for Addison's Disease at the University of Florida Veterinary Medical Center. Shelby's vet told them that surgery was possible, but it might not help. They were hesitant to pursue an invasive treatment on such an elderly dog. When the vet referred them to the Veterinary Medical Center's Acupuncture Service, they decided to try that.

The acupuncture seems to "jump start" communication between Shelby's brain and nerve synapses along her back and leg. This keeps the leg from slipping and dragging, Chapman explained. The acupuncture also seems to give Shelby more energy and helps her deal with pain from arthritic hips, and even seems to alleviate her mild deafness, or, Chapman says, at least keeps it from progressing.

According to vets who practice both Western veterinary medicine and acupuncture, Chapman's explanation makes sense. Dr. Jane Boston, of CountryChase Veterinary in Tampa, said that acupuncture can "speed up the tempo of the body and make it more in tune with normal life."

Acupuncture can also "slow down" the tempo of an anxious or hyperactive dog and "regulate anything in the body, given enough time," Boston added.

Dr. Shawna Green, of Medicine River Animal Hospital in Pinellas Park, uses acupuncture alone or alongside Western veterinary medicine for many different problems as well. "The results speak for themselves," she said.

That Shelby and Chapman have a strong bond is evident. Shelby frequently rests her head on Chapman's knee, gazing at her lovingly — and receives strokes and ear-rubs in exchange. Chapman makes all

of Shelby's food at home to help control Shelby's Addison's Disease and other health issues, including digestive problems. Chapman even makes homemade sweet-potato snacks for Shelby that Jana, an enthusiastic taste-tester, devours eagerly.

Chapman still takes Shelby to Gainesville for her twice-monthly acupuncture treatments, even though the family moved to Tampa in August. Continuity of care was important to her, she said, and Shelby is doing well with the integrated treatment she receives at the Gainesville center. "When we go there, Shelby knows where we're going. She's very patient, very calm during treatments," Chapman said. "I think she knows her leg slips and that it helps her." Her foot might start dragging a few days before her treatment, Chapman said, adding that they might need to increase the frequency of treatments if Shelby's symptoms worsen. In that case, Chapman said, they might switch to a local practitioner.

The University of Florida Veterinary Medical Center offers acupuncture as part of its Large Animal Hospital. Even though it is affiliated with the Large Animal Hospital, the Acupuncture Service treats mostly dogs and cats, as well as horses and "the occasional llama or wild animal," according to Dr. Carolina Ortiz-Umpierre, the chief of service at the acupuncture component.

Ortiz estimates that about 100 veterinarians in Florida are certified in veterinary acupuncture, including several in the Tampa Bay area. More and more pet owners are turning to Chinese medicine to treat their pets and improve the animals' quality of life.

Green said that between 30 percent and 40 percent of her patients use acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, and the number is growing. Acupuncture clients are a mix of Dr. Green's own patients, referrals from veterinary surgeons, and pet owners who want to try acupuncture.



How Does It Work?

Acupuncture works by stimulating communication between the brain and the nerves and by improving circulation. Chinese philosophy regards disease as an imbalance of chi — the life energy force — in the body. Acupuncture therapy is based on balancing the energy and correcting its flow, thereby healing the animal, according to Dr. Allen Schoen, a longtime practitioner of holistic and natural veterinary therapies, including acupuncture, and author of *Kindred spirits: How the remarkable bond between humans and animals can change the way we live*.

Vet students at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine can take an elective rotation at the Acupuncture Service, Dr. Ortiz said. The four slots available in each two-week rotation are nearly always full, she said. The rotation increases students' awareness of acupuncture as a treatment option, increasing the likelihood that they might pursue certification or refer future patients for acupuncture.

The Acupuncture Service also accepts two veterinarians per year as interns, provided they have completed coursework toward certification, Ortiz said. In Florida, veterinarians can pursue certification at the Chi Institute, in Reddick. Dr. Xie, the founder of the Institute, is also a faculty member at the Veterinary Medical Center's acupuncture service. Dr. Boston and Dr. Green both earned their acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine credentials at the Chi Institute.

Acupuncture and Chinese medicine work in animals the same way they work in people, and "maybe better," Boston said, explaining that people are more likely to provide incomplete or incorrect information about their symptoms. In China, acupuncture is used to treat ailments ranging from colds and stomachaches to heart disease, Boston said.

Veterinary acupuncture is used frequently to treat pain, particularly from arthritis, surgery, and trauma, such as being hit by a car; neurological disorders including seizures; skin disorders; and cancer. Boston highly recommends it for GI issues such as diarrhea and vomiting. In many cases, acupuncture helps alleviate symptoms rather than actually treating or

curing an illness — some patients do not even have a definitive diagnosis when they begin acupuncture treatments. Boston would like to see greater application of Chinese medicine with veterinary patients, but said that overcoming owners' resistance is sometimes a problem.

Chapman said she thinks Shelby (right) knows that the acupuncture treatments are improving her quality of life. "She goes in, without her leash, and sits right on the pad."

Sue Condron hesitated when a veterinarian and her own personal doctor recommended that she take her Japanese Shiba Inu, *ChooChooSan*, for acupuncture treatments. The dog, only six years old at the time, had been taking a low dose of steroids to alleviate chronic itching and skin problems. Choo also needed a cataract operation, Condron said, and had the pre-surgical blood tests done at the University of Florida's vet hospital. The results were so frightening that the dog could not have surgery and was immediately taken off the steroids. Her liver was enlarged and her blood panels were terrible, Condron said.

"I was skeptical but I was desperate," she said. Dr. Xie treated ChooChooSan with acupuncture and Chinese herbal treatments. It took some time to see results, but in six months, Choo's liver was back to normal, her blood tests were "better than mine," and she was able to have cataract surgery, Condron said.

"Choo is living proof that it works. If acupuncture could help Choo, it could help anyone. Whatever you hear about it that is positive, it's all true," Condron said.

Though the treatment is expensive, Condron said she'd be willing to increase the number of treatments if it continues to improve Choo's quality of life. "Other than her ill health, she's just the perfect companion and pet. She's just a love, happy to love and be loved," Condron says of the dog she raised from puppyhood.

Boston said that, while Westerners


are often looking for a "quick fix," results of acupuncture might not be evident until a pet has had several treatments, especially when addressing established or chronic conditions. "Chinese medicine shines in the chronic cases," she said. Much of Western medicine treats symptoms without addressing underlying causes, she said.



Top photo: Shelby during one of her acupuncture treatments;
Bottom photo: Shelby, post treatment.

"Since getting into Chinese medicine, I see how much of Western medicine is 'Band-Aids.' Now I feel like I can make a change in the body, like I can create health or wellbeing."

An acupuncture treatment might last less than a minute, or continue for half an hour or more. Some dogs might improve after only a few treatments while others might need regular treatment for months, or longer if they suffer from chronic conditions.

Green and Boston agree that most dogs and cats are extremely cooperative during their treatments. "Especially the cats, they're endorphin junkies and just relax into it," Green said. *continued next page* 



Peanut, a Dachshund patient at CountryChase Veterinary, is relaxed during her treatment. She has chronic back pain from degenerative disk disease. Here, four of the needles inserted connect to an electro-acupuncture machine that provides stronger stimulation and therefore longer-lasting effects. "Acupuncture is incredibly safe and has no side effects," Dr. Boston declares.

Shelby is patient as Ortiz palpates her joints to determine where to place the needles and just sits there quietly during the treatment. In addition to Ortiz, there are usually at least two students or interns present. "One reason we keep going to the vet school is, we think it's important to give back, to be part of the next gen-

eration of vets learning about acupuncture," Chapman said.

Shelby is a retired service dog and has been with Chapman for about 13 years, including working as Chapman's service dog for several years. Shelby was initially placed as a service dog with another woman. When that woman passed away, Shelby was taken in by family members, and then ended up with a veterinarian who was looking for an appropriate placement for her. Coincidence — or providence — intervened. Chapman's doctor knew the veterinarian and somehow, they had the idea of matching Shelby with Chapman.

"I was at the end of my rope," Chapman said. "She was there for me." Six years later, once Chapman no longer needed the assistance that Shelby provided, she retired Shelby into the life of a pampered pensioner.

"A lot of people might put a dog down when she's elderly and has health problems," Chapman said. "But she was there for me ... now it's my turn to serve her. Shelby's mind is fine, her personality is all there. She can still play. The acupuncture slows down the deterioration of her body and extends her quality of life," Chapman said. "If she can have good quality of life, it's worth pursuing." ✍

For more information on acupuncture, contact:

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Dr. Green, Medicine River Animal Hospital, 727.299.9029, www.medriveranimal.com;

Dr. Carolina Ortiz-Umpierre, 352.392.2235 ext. 4076, www.vetmed.ufl.edu/patientcare/services/acupuncture/

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