



needle

magic

acupuncture for pets

BY DR ALEX MELROSE

Acupuncture, in some form or other, has been around for 5000 years. Records show that fish-bone needles were used in China around 3000BC. The first veterinary text to include discussions of acupuncture techniques for Chinese cavalry horses was written in 600BC.

In the 21st century, there are two main schools of thought on acupuncture: biomedical and the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) approach. There is no real need to choose one aspect over the other. Science can now explain how most acupuncture works, however it doesn't override the thousands of years of careful observation and the collection of patterns and therapy that provide the foundations of TCM.

Acupuncture began being used in Western human treatments in the 1970s, and has also become widely accepted as beneficial in Western veterinary treatments (albeit 5000 years later than the East). Acupuncture affects the nervous system in many ways. Here's a brief look at what it is and does.

Acupuncture points occur at more than 360 sites on the human body and similar charts have now been created for animals. Acupuncture points have a higher density of neural and vascular components than non-acupuncture points, and are near a nerve trunk or large nerve branches and blood vessels. This means needle stimulation of acupuncture points excites nervous system fibres, including those contained within the walls of blood vessels. The introduction of a thin, sterile metal acupuncture needle into body tissue provokes inflammatory,

immune-modulatory and circulatory changes at the site. At the level of the skin and the deeper tissues beneath, this activates neurologic responses and healing activity.

Modern MRI images can illustrate the changes in brain and peripheral nerve oxygenation, showing that acupuncture influences vascular supply to all neural centres, beginning at the periphery and arriving at the brain's cerebral cortex. Other investigations into the effects of acupuncture-point stimulation on certain organs have demonstrated spinal cord influence for the heart, stomach, gallbladder, bladder and uterus. Consequently, acupuncture can also affect internal organ function.

Acupuncture offers a unique and effective means of stimulating pain-control mechanisms produced inside tissue. This is why many vets enter the sphere of acupuncture, using it initially for pain control. It is very effective, especially for arthritis, lameness and back pain, for support during chemotherapy, for very active canine athletes, and for support of gastrointestinal, respiratory and reproductive problems. Let's look at a couple of cases that illustrate how acupuncture works.

Clint, a seven-year-old Australian Cattle Dog with a large lump on his left side, had a biopsy that showed a grade-three Liposarcoma (malignant tumour). His owners opted against attempting a massive surgical removal. Clint was in a lot of pain, to the point of sometimes crying out, and was feeling very subdued. Acupuncture treatment was given around the mass to increase the flow of qi (vital air), stimulate the immune system, clear heat and address pain. The needles were

left in for the standard 20 minutes and at the end of that first treatment, the mass was no longer hot. Clint slept on the ride home, then ran into the backyard, raced around and grabbed his lead, keen for a walk. He had not exercised willingly in the previous several weeks. Clint was treated weekly for seven treatments, then every two weeks. He loved his treatments and would flop down on the bed for each visit. While cancer eventually took his life, Clint had another year of very active, happy times with his family, and had no pain medication until the last couple of weeks before he passed away.

Our second case study is Max, an eight-year-old Dachshund. As is common with this breed, with such an elongated body, Max had experienced a spinal disc protrusion with back pain and loss of co-ordination. This made Max very grumpy and despite medication and rest, he remained in pain. Acupuncture was added to his treatment when his owners decided against spinal surgery. The acupuncture points used were those surrounding his narrowed disc space, as well as TCM points for pain, bones and the back area. Immediately, Max had less pain on palpation of his back, perhaps due to decreased muscle spasms. As is common post-treatment, Max slept very soundly. When he awoke, Max was using his rear limbs a lot better. He was completely weaned off his medication, with acupuncture visits every three months. He continues to improve with treatment, can run again and is very happy.

Elaine Bennett is a very experienced osteopath and acupuncturist who consults at our veterinary practice. Before

clients bring in their pets, Elaine consults with us to obtain relevant information from their medical history that could influence treatment. At their appointment, she takes an extensive case history, including details of any injuries or changes in behaviour. During the physical examination she will observe the pet's natural movement and then manually palpate and articulate various joints to detect areas of reduced mobility, muscle spasm, wasting, inflammation and pain.

During the consultation the pet is checked from its feet upwards and from the nose to the tail. In many cases an animal has learnt to compensate for an old injury and over time this can manifest as pain elsewhere. In such cases the area of pain and the root cause are treated. Treatments often combine osteopathy, acupuncture and laser therapy to achieve the best results in the quickest time. Elaine uses a new low-power laser machine that is a totally pain-free treatment option. It can be used to stimulate acupuncture points in animals that do not seem comfortable with needles – especially some of our feline friends – it also treats and accelerates healing for a wide variety of soft tissue injuries. Treatments last up to 30 minutes, once we ensure the pet is relaxed and settled. Patients are often treated once a week, with a positive response noticed within the first three visits.

We've come a long way from fish-bone needles and early misconceptions, and now have a sound understanding of the science behind acupuncture. Ask your vet about this treatment option for your pets – it does work.

Photos by Elaine Bennett

Dr Alex Melrose is a veterinarian with more than 15 years' experience. He owns and manages the VetCare Animal Hospital in Grey Lynn, Auckland, phone 09 361 3500 or visit www.vetcare.net.nz