



## **CANINE ACUPUNCTURE**

**By: Alxe Noden**

Vickie Byrne's Great Dane, Max, developed a degenerative spinal condition which began to show up when he was about eight years old. Since there was little that modern veterinary medicine could do for her big guy, she turned to alternative therapies, one of which was acupuncture.

Acupuncture is one of the treatment modes of Traditional Chinese Medicine ("TCM"), developed in China over 2,000 years ago. This system of medicine relies less on structures of the body and more on the functions of its various systems, regulated by the flow of life energy, or chi, through the body. Chi is affected by the interplay between the body, the mind, and the environment. When this flow is interrupted, or the body loses its harmonious functioning and weakens, diseases can invade and injuries become more likely. Treatment is intended to deal not with symptoms, but with the underlying causes of the disease or injury.

The flow of the energy of the body is in patterns that follow lines, or meridians. At specific points on those lines, the energy flow can be affected, or changed, through pressure or acupuncture. (There are other TCM methods used to deal with disharmony, including massage, specific kinds of exercise, and herbology.)

Vickie tried acupuncture treatments on her Dane, with some success. She reports, "I knew that Max was not curable...but I believe that the acupuncture added perhaps up to a year of better quality life for my boy."

Linda Bammes sought acupuncture to help rehabilitate her six-year-old Boxer bitch. After surgery to repair a muscle torn off her rear knee, physical therapy was slow to help because muscles around the injury had atrophied. Linda brought in her acupuncturist and a massage therapist to help rebalance the bitch's body and back. Linda says that after the acupuncture, she became "a very convincing show dog—the only way anyone could tell she was injured was to see that she had a scar."

Dr. Cara Brannigan, DVM, has seen many of these recoveries first hand. She attended vet school, but once she began practicing, she believed that her exclusively Western-based training still left a gap in her ability to treat her patients.

"I felt whenever issues with mobility and pain came up, vets as a whole were trained to look for orthopedic or neurologic causes and then treat the disorders with appropriate pharmaceuticals. This is fine, but I kept feeling like we were missing something," Dr. Brannigan says.

Brannigan became more and more concerned as the use of “medication cocktails” grew into the standard of treatment. “I never felt we should abandon the proven scientific medications,” she says, “but we should do everything we can to maximize relief while minimizing risk.” She realized that acupuncture could be a part of her treatment protocol.

Like most states, Colorado (where Brannigan practices), requires that acupuncture treatments on animals must be performed by a licensed veterinarian. Therefore the people taking the acupuncture courses suggested by the American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture are all Western-trained vets with an existing idea of diagnosis and treatment. Most acupuncture treatments are therefore informed by a combination of Western diagnosis and some TCM diagnosis. For example, Brannigan utilizes the DATE system, which involves a physical examination of the animal to determine what acupuncture points are sensitive to touch. (A chart of some of the acupressure points on a dog is available at <http://www.luckydoghealth.com/dogacupressurechart.htm>.)

In addition to the physical exam, most acupuncturists will take a medical history, and ask to see results of (or order) blood tests, x-rays, and the like. Often it's useful to the acupuncturist to understand something of the environment where the animal lives; Marilyn Woods-Brown, DVM, likes to hear about what other animals are in the household, whether there are stairs in the house, what the dog eats. These all give a clearer picture of both the animal and the things that might affect its health.

Once the acupuncturist has determined a diagnosis, they will have the animal sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Many treatments are done at home by vets making house calls; both Brannigan and Woods-Brown like to work where the animal is calm and not threatened. Needles are inserted at various points in the body, usually using small plastic tubes as guides and stabilizers. The needles stay in about a half hour. Brannigan estimates that 99% of dogs will tolerate this treatment well; she says cats are by far the most difficult patients! You can see parts of an actual treatment on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9PONItkEUs>.

Not everyone is convinced by the anecdotal evidence. David Ramey, DVM, practices equine medicine in southern California, and writes, “In fact, other than testimonials, there’s really no good evidence that acupuncture does work in animals.” Though he admits that some studies have shown positive results, these were “poorly designed” (though he does not specify how). (See his article and citations at <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/index.php/animal-acupuncture>.)

Dr. Brannigan points out that acupuncture, whether on humans or in animals, is difficult to study using traditional double-blind study methods. For one thing, how can you fake putting in needles? She points out that “sham acupuncture,” where needles are placed randomly in people, not on actual acupuncture points,

still results in relief, possibly due to the placebo effect. This would be even more challenging in animals, who can't describe how the treatment feels or its results.

With or without studies to back them up, many veterinary acupuncturists see results for treating a wide variety of conditions, including arthritis, digestive problems, reproductive issues, and heart troubles. Chronic pain associated with bone or nerve problems seems especially susceptible to acupuncture treatment. Jenifer Sarnosky saw her Welsh Corgi go from being in so much pain that he occasionally lost the use of his back legs, to a complete recovery of mobility with only two acupuncture treatments. He lived another 10 years pain-free, until the back problems caused by the original ruptured disk returned and she had to put him down.

Recovery is not usually so quick. Woods-Brown tends to treat acute pain, such as disk problems with paralysis, more aggressively, with as many as two treatments per day for two or three days, then perhaps two times per week for a period after that. Generally she treats a chronic condition one time per week for three weeks, and then determines further treatments based on results. Some animals have regular monthly treatments for their entire lives.

Costs for canine acupuncture vary widely depending on geography. Most often the first treatment is more expensive, since it takes longer to get a full medical history and diagnosis; later treatments are usually cheaper. In New York or California, you might pay \$150 for an initial visit and \$100 per treatment after that; in the middle parts of the country, you might pay \$75-80 for the first treatment and \$50 thereafter, depending on whether your pet is seen at home or in a clinic.

Though the efficacy of acupuncture might be disputed, and its action not fully understood, many believe in it. Dr. Brannigan tells the story of a young Labrador who was hit by a car, resulting in cranial and facial fractures and damaged nerves. Once everything that Western medicine had to offer had been tried to heal him, he was still left with a significant facial "droop" on one side: drooling lip, pulling lower eyelid, crooked nose, and lack of motion. When every other treatment failed, Dr. Brannigan tried acupuncture on the dog, with startling results. His droop improved markedly and his face returned nearly to normal. It's stories like these that keep people coming back to acupuncture to help their dogs.

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