

Introduction and overview of integrative veterinary medicine and opportunities this presents for practice

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Integrative, (or Holistic) medicine is the optimal combination of both conventional and complementary veterinary medicine, taking the very best of both approaches to provide a comprehensive diagnostic methodology as well as vastly increased therapeutic options for the veterinarian. With Integrative medicine, the aim is to create balance for the physical, mental and emotional needs of the body, thus all levels are addressed to ensure complete health and well-being. One could suggest this could be the veterinary model for the future due to this comprehensive approach and optimal combining of the best of many medical systems.

There is a common misunderstanding that Integrative medicine is all about homeopathy or herbs. This is like saying veterinary science is all about antibiotics, which is of course blatantly untrue. It's about a professionally tailored approach to the individual, with well-designed diagnostic plans, careful history taking and then a tailor made therapeutic plan involving optimal nutrition for that individual, possible nutraceutical support and then maybe a combination of pharmaceutical drugs, surgery or perhaps some other therapy such as herbs, acupuncture, osteopathy, or another of the many possible modalities that are available.

The Integrative approach integrates knowledge from many sources - conventional veterinary medicine (using drugs and surgery) as well as ancient Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic, herbal medicine or manipulative arts such as chiropractic and massage. Integrative medicine recognises all beings as individuals and so the approach to a specific medical condition may differ for each animal, and therefore an individually tailored treatment plan is important.

An Integrative approach not only recognises the secondary presenting symptoms, but is very concerned with a primary cause and the need to improve the underlying immune system and overall health of the individual. In conventional veterinary medicine, we tend to focus largely on presenting physical symptoms, many of which are secondary to immune imbalance, poor diet, and unhealthy emotional and mental states. These symptoms are generally attributed to one or two things such as a virus, a bacteria, a metabolic or degenerative issue. While this may well be the case, an integrative approach looks for an underlying cause/s and investigates dietary habits, current and past responses to therapies, basic day to day living conditions, past traumas, emotional states, and relationship with the owners.

Succumbing to a bacterial or viral condition may mean there is a suboptimal immune response, poor dietary habits, underlying pain, and possibly stressful living conditions, which suppress the immune system further.

As integrative vets we may well dispense some antibiotics for the acute short term improvement, but then we make sure the long term recovery and prevention plan is in place by covering dietary improvement specific for that individual, possibly adding some nutraceuticals and herbs to support immune function and addressing the source of the pain i.e. Acupuncture for arthritis or a disc injury. We may also have some management suggestions to reduce stress and if the animal is emotionally imbalanced, possibly some flower essences to rebalance the emotions. Other immune balancing therapies may also be used.

Therefore, an Integrative approach is interested in BOTH the short term improvement and alleviation of symptoms (especially pain) as well as a long term solution and management plan. The aim is to minimise long term reliance on drug therapies by re-balancing body systems so the animals' inherent healing ability is allowed to flourish and self healing is promoted. A preventive plan is nearly always implemented as well, so the body remains as healthy as it can be in the long term. In long standing chronic cases this may be difficult, but with the array of therapies available, there is almost always something that can be done to improve the individual's quality of life.

How do we approach cases?

An Integrative approach, just like conventional veterinary medicine begins with a thorough history and clinical examination, but the questions go further than just the presenting issues. We aim to understand why the animal came to this point of disease so that we can try to rebalance the body and best support the inherent healing wisdom. A sound and professional diagnosis is ideal before therapeutic options are considered. Just as with conventional vet medicine, blood tests, ultra sound, radiographs, and detailed clinical exams may be necessary to get as sound a diagnosis as possible. Once this has been achieved, an individualised treatment plan is devised.

This is where integrative medicine excels as the range of therapeutic options are vast and can cover not just the physical problems but also the underlying immune dysfunction and possible emotional issues. As Integrative vets we have all our traditional veterinary therapeutic options such as surgery, antibiotics, steroids and other drugs to choose from as well as acupuncture, acupressure, herbs, chiropractic, massage, flower essences, Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP), Nambutripad's Allergy Elimination Technique (NAET), essential oils, orthobionomy, NIS to name a few. It takes skill and experience to know what to use as well as when and how to use these tools to tailor make a sound, effective and professional therapeutic plan for the individual animal and owner.

Nutrition

In most cases, a review of the animals' nutrition is very important as high quality nutrition is the foundation of health. When an animal (or human) is eating poorly, this will often be reflected by their health status. So a high quality diet, appropriate for the animals' age, sex, metabolic rate, reproductive state and level of exercise is a very important place to start. Some animals do very well on commercial super premium foods; some do better on a well-designed, well supplemented homemade diet. Often a combination of the two can be an ideal mix, but effective communication with the owner as to what is being fed, especially with homemade foods, is important to ensure the diet is appropriate, complete and balanced.

For most animals with a health issue, providing the right amounts of omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids (generally deficient in most commercial foods because of their instability), vitamins, anti-oxidants and certain minerals can make an immense difference to their general well-being and assist greatly in an animals' recovery. Whilst basic nutrition is crucial to provide the important micro and macro nutrients imperative for normal physiological function, some of our most useful therapeutic aids in Integrative medicine are nutritional supplements, often known as Nutraceuticals. Some commonly used nutraceuticals such as glucosamine, Methyl-Sulphonyl Methane (MSM), s-adenosylmethionine (SAMe), Vitamin B complex and Omega 3 fatty acids are simple to integrate into therapy and often bring about a marked improvement in many health conditions.

Management

Addressing an animal's exercise and entertainment requirements, emotional state and relationships with the owners and other animals can all give clues as to why the animal has developed current health or behavioral issues. All these need to be worked on if a good recovery is to be made. Emotional and behavioral problems can seriously hinder physical recovery and are often the main contributing factor/s to the presenting physical issue. If only the physical symptom is treated and not the underlying emotional problem then the likelihood of a sustained and complete recovery is low. A good example of this is behavioral overgrooming in cats. If it is a truly behavioral problem, then treating it with steroids to reduce skin inflammation is often a very temporary fix. By looking deeper at aspects of the cat's personality, living arrangements and relationships with other human and animal members of its immediate environs, a mix of management changes (perhaps removing an aggressor cat) and emotional balancing therapies such as flower essences, nutraceuticals and maybe some calming herbs will give a significantly longer acting and permanent "cure".

Other therapeutic modalities

When choosing an appropriate therapeutic agent, an Integrative approach can call upon any drug, surgical technique, or other commonly used conventional therapy as well as a vast array of "complementary" therapies, such as those listed above. These all require training and practice to achieve proficiency and many integrative veterinarians have spent many hours and a lot of money to obtain the training required. This necessitates dedication and belief that there is, in most situations, a solution to any health issue, which may involve a single type of therapy or combinations. In my experience, it is rare that there is nothing that can be done; there are always options to try if the client wants to take that particular path. However, in some situations, doing nothing may be the best course of "action".

And it is for this reason that it is important for ALL veterinarians to be aware of the potential outcomes of these valuable array of therapeutic modalities. It may not be something that all vets would want to study in-depth, but it is vital that they know what can be achieved with the different therapies and then ideally have the opportunity to refer to a vet that is proficient in using them. There should be no need to the phrase "there's nothing more we can do" unless all these avenues for treatment have been explored. In my view, vets may say there's nothing more I can do, but fail to realise there may be something someone else can do. This is why we have specialised referral practices, no one can know it all, and you usually excel at what really interests you.

Opportunities for practice

By adopting an Integrative approach to all your consultations; looking at all parts of the animal – physical, mental, emotional and addressing these levels for health, looking at the nutritional status of the animal as well as deciding on using nutraceuticals and combining complementary therapies as well as conventional therapies, the opportunities are huge. Not only are you providing a far more comprehensive and superior consultancy service, you are getting to the bottom of long standing tenuous problems and achieving cures that were never even dreamed about, often "miraculous"; the personal and professional satisfaction of achieving this is priceless.

Consultations are often much longer as you are looking at all aspects of the animal, but can be charged for accordingly as more and more clients are requesting these services. Sales of nutraceuticals and high quality foods are a given as well as charging for the time taken for the

actual treatments to be performed. Being known as an “integrative medicine friendly” practice is can also be an important marketing tool, as clients become far more informed as to the range of therapies available and want to find practitioners who are proficient in performing them. They want positive results, not repeats of drugs that may ultimately be detrimental to their pets. Also we as vets don’t want to be always doling out repeats of drugs that are, at best controlling symptoms and often not getting to the bottom of the problem; this is not really affecting a cure by any stretch of the imagination.

If I said to you as vets, there are techniques that can identify AND resolve allergies, moving an atopic dog from full time steroids to no steroids and no symptoms, permanently, or long term IBD (Inflammatory Bowel Disease) sufferers to completely normal bowels over 5-6 weeks, without the use of drugs and being able to eat whatever they want to – wouldn’t you be interested in knowing how to do this? The examples just go on and on, providing answers to problems our conventional model that we currently use is simply unable to address. Conventional medicine can provide many fine results, but there are definitely areas where there isn’t a satisfactory result. This is where the other types of therapies can be brought in and used. This is the enormous opportunity an integrative approach can achieve and all it requires is an open mind, a willingness to look outside the square and appropriate training in the way Integrative medicine approaches health problems and the different therapeutic options available.