

# Warming to the Role

Therapy laser technicians find a wealth of rewards administering laser therapy.

By Dennis Arp  
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When clinics add laser therapy to their pain-management arsenal, veterinary technicians often become the point people—and the most ardent advocates—of the technological advance. In the beginning, however, it's not unusual for them to harbor a healthy dose of skepticism.

Anneke Van Tricht is among those who took no convincing. In fact, before she'd ever used the Companion Therapy Class IV Laser that is now her veterinary tool of choice, she was sure it would ease patients' pain and increase their mobility.

You might even say she felt it in her bones. Especially in her vertebrae.

"I had experienced the benefits of laser therapy on the human side with my own back (injury) five years ago," said Van Tricht, a veterinary technician at Midway Animal Hospital in Seminole, Fla. "It saved me from surgery. For me, it's a miracle."

Wielding the hand piece of relief is now one of her favorite tasks, Van Tricht said. Not only does it give her the chance to have a direct effect on patients' quality of life, it makes her a driver of a significant source of new revenue for the practice.

Not all clinic duties carry such rewards, so veterinary technicians say they relish the moments they get to focus their compassion and expertise on the ailing and aging animals in their care.

"Sometimes animals that have been in pain for a long time can be shy or aggressive," said Van Tricht, who has been Midway's main laser therapy technician for about a year and a half. "After they feel the warmth of the laser, they learn to trust you, and suddenly they don't mind going to the vet, even when it means getting vaccines."

"When you see them learn to trust again, that's a nice moment."

At Arapahoe Animal Hospital in Boulder, Colo., Lisa DeMartini-Haden, one of the industry's earliest adopters of laser therapy, said days are almost always filled with laser therapy appointments—sometimes as many as 12 in a shift. So many that the five-doctor, two-location hospital set up a room just for laser therapy, complete with a couch for clients and an orthopedic dog bed on the floor to keep patients comfortable.

"Sometimes they just about rip their owners' arms out before they get off the leash and run down the hallway to me," DeMartini-Haden said.

Practice co-owner Greg Hayes, DVM, is almost as enthusiastic about having DeMartini-Haden on the team.

"I prescribe it, but Lisa has as good a handle as anyone around on the settings and the other aspects of laser therapy," Dr. Hayes said. "I'll bet she's done 2,000 to 3,000 cases. She's really helped us push the envelope of what's possible with this therapy."

When DeMartini-Haden began using Arapahoe's first 6-watt therapeutic laser in mid-2005, "I was interested, but I was also nervous," she recalled. "I was thinking, 'If this is some kooky thing just to get (clients) to spend money, I won't be able to do it. I just won't.'"

After learning about the science behind the device, she saw firsthand the effects—how the laser stimulated endorphin release while decreasing inflammation and "normalizing" tissues, thus restoring metabolic function and promoting healing. "I really got into it," she said.

Now she has a 12-watt Companion Therapy Laser to work with, and she takes ownership of its scheduling and use. When she doesn't get the results she expects, she digs into case files and compares new X-rays to old, "trying to see if there's something we missed."

The responsibility has given her added confidence in her role, DeMartini-Haden said.

"My relationship with the doctors has also been strengthened," she added. "I get to be involved through all the stages of care and follow up with the clients and the doctors. This has all brought a new level of job satisfaction and excitement to my career."

Like DeMartini-Haden, Bree Brooks quickly embraced laser technology, so when she joined Westgate Veterinary Hospital in Enterprise, Ala., she was disappointed to learn it didn't have a therapeutic laser. Her stories of the benefits helped persuade C. Adam Carter, DVM, to add it to the practice in December.

Veterinary technicians who administer laser therapy seem to have favorite success stories to share. For Brooks, one involves a 9-year-old greyhound named Davey who suffered from severe muscle atrophy in his hips. He was limping, not eating, in pain and on non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication.

"After his first treatment Dec. 20, we took him off any meds," Brooks said. "Now he's on his 11th treatment. His owner said that since she adopted him in September, he's never been able to jump up on the bed. But he did last night."

The clinic uses laser therapy to treat post-operative pain and inflammation, severe infections, lick granulomas, arthritis and other conditions. Brooks and Dr. Carter are always looking for new opportunities to bring relief, Brooks said.

"When you see results," she said, "you want to share it."

For Claire Finer-Stubblebine, CVT, who administers laser therapy at Brown Veterinary Clinic in Naples, Fla., the rewards start with working one on one to aid patients and clients.

"The patients start relaxing because the therapy is adding to their comfort," she said, "but it also helps put the client at ease about the treatment itself and about the hope that their pet will enjoy a better quality of life. It really is therapy all around."



The warmth of the laser puts many patients at ease.

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Treating a squirmy patient sometimes requires an extra pair of hands.

Finer-Stubblebine has used the laser to treat everything from pain and swelling after dental extractions to chronic otitis externa and rattlesnake bites. "We're always thinking, 'Can we use the laser on that?'"

She promotes the therapy to clients but is careful not to push. "I don't like to put them on the spot, forcing them to decline something they want but just can't afford," she said.

For a single treatment not associated with surgery, Brown Veterinary Clinic charges \$50, but discounts are available for a series of six (\$240) and 10 (\$350) treatments. A post-surgery treatment is \$13.

Once clients commit themselves to the treatment, the cost typically takes a back seat to the benefits, veterinary technicians say. In the best of cases, the warmth passes from the patient to the client before returning to the person at the point of the process.

For many veterinary technicians, that glow is sustaining.

"I am so grateful," DeMartini-Haden said, "to be able to do what I do on a daily basis." ●

*This Education Series article was underwritten by Companion Therapy Lasers of Newark, Del.*