

Uses of Therapeutic Laser Expand

By Dennis Arp
For Veterinary Practice News

Because her therapeutic laser operates outside the visible light spectrum, Robin Downing, DVM, has to trust what her eyes can't see.

Luckily for her and for the patients in her pain-management referral practice, the consistently positive reactions are as clear as day.

"We see results we have not been able to achieve any other way," says Downing, Dipl. American Academy of Pain Management, CVA, CCRP. "The time for broad application of this healing technology is here."

Dr. Downing, owner and hospital director of The Downing Center for Animal Pain Management LLC in Windsor, Colo., isn't alone in her embrace of laser therapy. For a growing number of veterinary practitioners, the technology is no longer just the wavelength of the future. It's a here-and-now tool for managing chronic and acute pain.

For Downing, the appeal of the therapeutic laser became clear during her canine rehabilitation training at the University of Tennessee in 2005. She studied the science behind laser therapy—how it helps increase endorphin release while decreasing inflammation and "normalizing" tissues, thus restoring metabolic function. She quickly incorporated the technology into her pain-management practice, starting with osteoarthritic patients.

"Our use of laser has matured since we added it to our repertoire," she adds. "As I've read more about how laser is



Eye protection must be worn when administering treatment. Here, an aide keeps a patient from looking at the laser. The therapy also can be used on horses, below left.

applied to humans for various conditions, my consideration of who makes a good candidate has expanded."

Now she uses her LiteCure Companion Therapy Class IV laser for post-op pain and to kick-start healing, to treat acupuncture points on patients intolerant of needle placement and to alleviate pain in one of the most challenging areas of treatment—the iliopsoas muscle bundle, or core muscles that help stabilize the lower spine.

"I really can't acupuncture the iliopsoas, and tissue manipulation was only marginally effective," she says. "Then I learned about the laser."

"It's hard to characterize the results, other than to say that my previous frustration melted away. I'm now able to treat effectively patients who in the past would get to a certain level of comfort and function, then plateau."

"The laser isn't a panacea for all pain cases, but it is one more important tool in the toolbox."

Laser technology is front and center in the practice of Don Nunn, DVM, owner and operator of Integrity Animal Hospital in Kingsland, Ga.

"This is an absolutely miraculous machine," says Dr. Nunn, who has had his laser for about a year. "We've never seen results like these."

Nunn has enjoyed success in a variety of cases, including otitis externa, orthopedics, bladder inflammation, infectious cough and even snakebite. A common application is for hip dysplasia.

"We've had dogs who've been barely able to walk, then after a series of six

treatments, they're acting like puppies," he says. "We treated a 100-pound Akita the owner couldn't even bring in. When we got there to load him in the pickup, he was laying in his own urine."

"After the first treatment, we were able to towel-walk him around. After three more, he was able to walk on his own. Then after six, he was running around the back yard."

The owners felt like they had regained a family member, Nunn says.

"Moments like that are special for my staff and for me as well."

After Downing prescribes laser therapy, technicians usually deliver the treatments, she says. They revel in seeing painful patients gain relief.

"They get to see an almost immediate positive response," Downing says, "and that further reinforces their important role on our health-care team."

Staff members who experience firsthand the benefits of laser therapy can become powerful advocates for a practice's use of the technology, says LiteCure's Dean Francis, who helps veterinarians get the most out of their device.

"We try to relate all of our case studies, but the best scenario is if (practitioners) have their own success stories to tell," says Francis, LiteCure's companion sales director.

Francis also helps veterinarians understand the laser's potential to improve their bottom line. A typical six-session protocol is three treatments the first week, two the next and one the third, at a charge of \$35 to \$60 per session.

Nunn has billed for about 700 treatments in his year of laser use, grossing \$25,000. That more than recoups the equipment's cost of less than \$20,000.

Nunn and Downing say clients are eager to try non-invasive, side-effect-free options for pain relief, so they typically don't balk at the cost or voice concerns about safety. To help allay any fears, Nunn encourages clients to hold their pet during the procedure.

Downing thinks it helps that she has performed CO₂ laser surgery since 1999.

"Our clients have heard us talking about one laser or another for a long time," she notes. "I also think pet owners are better informed these days about their own options in health care, and that includes low-level laser therapy."

Such therapy plays a part in Downing's marketing efforts, figuring prominently in printed materials and on her website.

"Certainly it is a differentiator for us," she says. "We will actually be emphasizing it more in 2009."

Downing looks forward to the day she can share the results of clinical studies that confirm laser therapy's effectiveness in treating pain in animals. She knows of one pending trial and hopes others will follow.

Until those studies are conducted, practitioners such as Nunn and Downing will continue to rely on anecdotal clinical evidence. The good news is that each day, the "Seeing is Believing" file grows more robust.

"From our results," Nunn says, "there should be one in every office." ●

The laser isn't a panacea for all pain cases, but it is one more important tool.

—Robin Downing, DVM

