

A special advertising section

Laser-assisted rehabilitation leads the way

By Jeff Smith, DVM, CCRP
For The Education Center

A question all veterinarians should ask themselves is: Where is veterinary practice headed?

If you see vaccines, pharmacy items, spaying and neutering, or cat visits on the decline, in what direction should you take your practice?

Most authorities suggest that veterinarians focus on providing expertise and technology that clients value and cannot find elsewhere. Dentistry and pharmacological pain management were two great evolutions in veterinary care to follow that design. Rehabilitation, physical therapy and multimodal pain management are perhaps the next great frontiers.

We have been cautious as a profession in recognizing these paradigm shifts, perhaps because most practicing DVMs have had no training or education in these new areas. Simultaneously, clients have been clamoring for drug-free, surgery-free and non-invasive therapies.

Rehabilitation is one solution that addresses both the demands of the client and the needs of the clinic.

Most pet owners are familiar with the concept of rehabilitation from their own experiences with human surgery and physical therapy. As a result, rehabilitation sessions are appreciated and valued by clients—they absolutely love being able to participate in the healing.

The new AAHA/AAFP Revised Pain Management Guidelines state that using only pharmacologic management for pain is no longer sufficient. Although animals will heal and recover without rehabilitation, they will suffer less and heal better with rehabilitation.

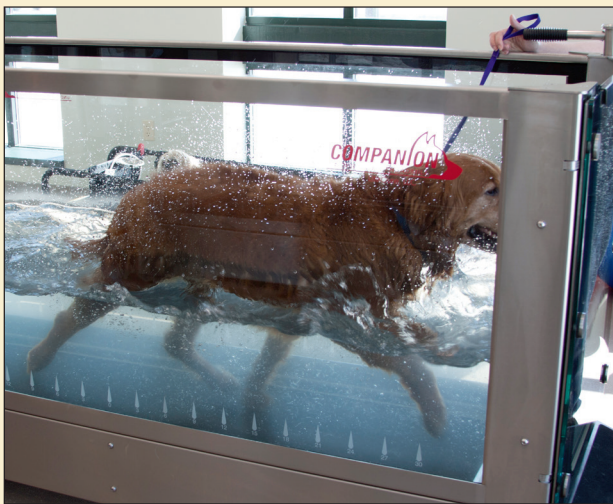
For example, we know unequivocally that there is less bone loss, cartilage atrophy and flexibility loss with a properly rehabilitated tibial plateau leveling osteotomy patient. In most areas of the United States, at least one or two veterinarians offer these services, but like dentistry, there is ample caseload for every clinic to offer at least a basic rehabilitation program.

Many veterinarians want to see the evidence that rehabilitation modalities work, and a significant body of evidence is growing each year. In addition to Level III Evidence, the acceptance from board-certified specialists, veterinary schools, rehabilitation programs, professional sports teams and pain management experts goes a long way to validate rehabilitation.

On the business side, there is not a single better investment for a veterinary clinic. Like dentistry, rehabilitation is a doctor-prescribed and technician-administered modality, so DVM time is well leveraged. Rehab provides a completely new service and revenue stream that yields excellent outcomes—a win-win for clinics and patients.

Expertise

How can the average practice begin to incorporate rehabilitation into its services? Start with three types of cases: hips (osteoarthritis/degenerative joint disease), knees (cranial cruciate ligament disease, post-op especially) and backs (intervertebral disk disease). This focus leads to valuable experience in many rehabilitation basics and provides a base from which to expand into more difficult and esoteric conditions—quadriceps



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contracture, fibrocartilaginous embolism, fracture management, etc.

Clinics can develop guidelines for each of these conditions, and then modify the protocols to individualize treatments for each patient. Most practices find this approach to be practical as well as an effective method of developing an in-house rehabilitation program.

The certified canine rehabilitation practitioner and certified canine rehabilitation therapist programs are optimal ways to achieve the proper training in this field.

Medical Technology

Most tools that can be used in rehabilitation are inexpensive: balance boards, peanut balls, cavaletti rails, slings, harnesses, ice packs, stairs, ramps and land

(dry) treadmills. However, to step into a higher-level rehabilitation program, the two most effective pieces of equipment to provide are a therapeutic laser and an underwater treadmill.

The investment in these items provides a very good monetary return, assuming one selects reliable and effective equipment.

In evaluating a therapeutic laser, doctors should look for a long warranty, robust construction, detailed software protocols following target tissue dosing, contact applicators, sufficient power (ideally 9 to 15 watts) optimal wavelengths (800 to 1,100 nm), educational/training support, marketing support and financing options.

In an underwater treadmill, doctors should look for a good warranty, ease of cleaning, ease of maintenance, intuitive controls, robust construction and construction materials (stainless steel, etc.), control panel accessibility, patient visibility, two access doors, dry running ability, technical support, repair support and financing options.

Effective therapeutic lasers stimulate healing, decrease inflammation and decrease pain. Infrared laser light can efficiently penetrate to deep tissue structures

particularly when administered through a contact lens and at higher powers (ideally over 9 watts for larger areas/animals).

Laser therapy science is well understood and documented, and it should not be considered a form of alternative therapy. Further, the administration of laser therapy is straightforward and safe—certainly much easier to perform than dental radiographs. Most pets with chronic conditions are treated three times a week for two to four weeks and then may be transitioned to being treated once every two to four weeks.

Underwater treadmill therapy comes naturally to most patients and provides several therapeutic benefits that other forms of therapy do not: improvements in strength, muscular endurance, weight loss, cardiovascular fitness, range of motion, agility and behavioral well-being.

While gravity is the primary resistive force out of water, viscosity, friction and turbulence are the primary forces while in water. In addition, the buoyancy of water reduces weight bearing while treadmill walking encourages proper gait patterning. Moreover, pets cooperate with underwater treadmill therapy to a much greater degree than they do many other forms of physical therapy.

Pets are treated on a schedule similar to the laser therapy recommendations. As with laser therapy, the learning curve with underwater treadmills is relatively short for veterinary assistants.

Affordable and Inviting

Both laser therapy and underwater treadmill therapy are affordable for most clients. Typical charges range from \$45 to \$95 per session.

These therapies provide great medicine and good business, but the most remarkable impact of these services is the client appreciation and bonding they engender.

Clients are often present for the sessions, and the pets have an extraordinarily comfortable experience, so both patients and clients leave with a pervading sense of happiness and satisfaction.

Even more, clients cannot resist photographing their pets wearing Doggles, or using the underwater treadmill, then sharing those photos through social media. That is the best advertising a veterinarian never had to buy.

An Eventuality

The biggest obstacle is the veterinarian's will to take on an entirely new service and area of expertise. Most clinics can begin modestly and build up to a fully-fledged rehabilitation program as resources become available and training or experience becomes more advanced.

Like dentistry, rehabilitation is a service that most veterinarians will someday offer. So, in the end, the question returns to: What direction should you take your practice? ●



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