

Spreading the Warmth

Veterinary technicians welcome responsibility of administering Class IV laser therapy.

By Dennis Arp
Contributing Editor

Like most veterinary technicians, Brad Schaefer tackles a daily to-do list that's long and varied. Still, there's no hesitation when he's asked to name his least-favorite duty.

"I'm not a fan of euthanasia cases," says Schaefer, head veterinary technician at River Road Animal Hospital in Southport, N.C.

Luckily, he notes, there's a task at the other end of the care spectrum. With lightning speed, Class IV laser therapy swings the balance of his day back into positive territory.

"It's definitely great to know there's something I can do to help a patient—and client—feel better," Schaefer says.

As the use of laser therapy expands, it's often veterinary technicians who wield the wand of relief. Not only does assigning this task free up veterinarians, thus strengthening a clinic's return on investment, but it also enriches the techs' professional lives, practitioners say.

The overall workday becomes more enjoyable, those involved note, and the technicians become more committed advocates for veterinary medicine in general and for their home clinic in particular.

All Schaefer knows is that when he turns on his clinic's LiteCure Companion Therapy Laser, more than the patient feels the warmth.

"The laser puts some of the healing power in the hands of technicians, including myself, and that's something we all appreciate," he says.

Schaefer was a skeptic before the clinic added laser therapy to its pain-management arsenal about a year ago. Then a demonstration team came in, "and now I can't say enough good things about it," he says.

"We've seen an incredible step-up in recovery times from surgery, and we've seen the difference it makes in reducing swelling. It's absolutely fantastic."

Controlling Edema

Alyssa Travis, DVM, River Road's owner and operator, says the laser's effect in controlling post-operative edema "is my favorite thing about it."

That and the way it has helped the technicians on her staff grow into a new role.

"I completely rely on the technicians to manage (the laser therapy)," she says. "It's their modality. They keep up to date on its use and work closely with the tech who represents the manufacturer. If they have a question, they make a couple of phone calls and get the information.

"They truly act like a nurse would on the human side."

As a solo practitioner, Dr. Travis especially appreciates being able to prescribe a laser treatment plan for a patient, then yielding to staff members so she can focus on other elements of care and on managing her practice.

John Godbold, DVM, also a solo practitioner, often lectures on Class IV laser use and tells veterinarians it's not a good business model to block out 15 minutes of their clinical time to administer a treatment that typically returns \$40 to \$45.

"But it's very practical and workable for a single staff member to do that," says Dr. Godbold, who owns Stonehaven Park Veterinary Hospital in Jackson, Tenn.

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— Alyssa Travis, DVM



PHOTO BY JOHN C. GODBOLD JR., DVM

"That's part of where the positive return on investment comes in."

Travis adds that her veterinary technicians "definitely have ideas on using it where I may have forgotten it was applicable."

For instance, the clinic treats a fair number of wildlife cases, including those for which treatment protocols are scarce. If Travis isn't sure whether drug therapies are safe, the laser can be an especially welcome choice, she says.

"The laser gets a lot more use than I ever thought it would, and in such a variety of arenas," she notes.

Travis bought the Class IV laser with chronic pain and arthritis in mind. Finding additional opportunities to speed healing and relieve pain has improved client satisfaction and improved the clinic's financial bottom line.

Another plus: The laser has shown pet owners "how wonderful our technicians are in helping their pets heal," Travis says. "It's been a great eye-opener for everyone."

At Vulcan Park Animal Care in Birmingham, Ala., hospital manager Chuck Eagar has always found rewards in his daily duties. But often he doesn't get to experience the direct effects of his care.

"If the owner doesn't follow up, you hope the patient got better, but you don't see it," he says.

Mobile Again

With the laser, Eagar enjoys overseeing the treatment of patients such as a 16-year-old chow chow, who was boarded at the clinic because of his limited mobility and eventually was unable to use his back end at all.

"We started using a sling to get him out to use the bathroom," Eagar says.

Eagar was among those who persuaded the dog's owner to let the clinic try laser therapy. After the fourth treatment, the dog almost knocked down an attendant as he jumped from the cage to go outside, Eagar says.

"He was mobile again, and we were able to buy at least three or four more months for that dog with his owner."

Such moments are powerful, says Jennifer Donaldson, a vet tech who administers about 95 percent of the laser therapy treatments at Stonehaven Park.

"To see a patient do better, sometimes right away, is a wonderful experience," she says. "It's a feeling of, 'Wow, I did that.'"

For River Road's Schaefer, the work day begins ahead of the clinic's 9 a.m. opening with a check of the hospitalized patients. Then he might prep the surgery suite, get anesthesia forms signed and catheters placed. Fitting laser treatments into the schedule is easy, he says, because treatments typically take less than 10 minutes.

Schaefer and Eagar both like seeing laser treatment on the daily schedule, especially if the patient is an older pet, which often has the most to gain.

In some cases it's a chance to turn the prospect of a heart-wrenching moment into one of relief and delight.

"The owners are so thankful," Schaefer says. "It's a moment when we all can feel thankful." ●