

PVMA Article
by

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Referring for CAVM

CAVM (Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine) includes such therapies as acupuncture, spinal manipulation, homeopathy, Chinese and Western herbal medicine, and others. Many conventional veterinarians are interested in the possible benefits of alternative care for their patients, but they may be unsure when to refer in the course of therapy and for which diseases, unsure how alternative care will be combined with conventional therapy, concerned about potential harm from a modality they aren't familiar with, or concerned about an alternative practitioner changing or omitting their conventional protocols. All of these are understandable concerns that need to be addressed so patients can receive the best of both worlds.

As with any medicine, the earlier alternative therapy is begun in the disease process, the more successful treatment will be. Unfortunately, people often think of alternative care only as a last resort when all their conventional options have been exhausted. While CAVM can be successful in such cases, reserving it as a “last ditch” effort is certainly not the best recipe for success. Methods such as acupuncture and herbs can be started at any time during therapy, and adjusted as needed when the patient's condition shifts. Patients can also be evaluated from a CAVM perspective for wellness checks; a Chinese tongue and pulse evaluation, and palpation of the acupuncture points, can provide early warning signs of potential tendencies to be addressed before symptoms begin.

Conditions that can benefit from CAVM are wide-ranging, including atopy, seizures, behavior problems, Cushing's, IBD, IVDD, tendonitis, immune-mediated arthritis, cancer, internal organ diseases, etc. The reason for this breadth of application is that methods such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbal therapy were developed in their own right as general medical approaches to disease. With the advent of modern medicine their benefits have been forgotten in the wake of powerful drugs and precision surgery, but they still have a place for today's patient. CAVM can augment the benefits of conventional care (e.g. improve the response to drugs and surgery), tone down side-effects of modern drugs (e.g. alleviate the gastrointestinal irritation from chemotherapy), permit the tapering or removal of potentially harmful drugs (e.g. rimadyl), and offer benefits in cases where a conventional option either doesn't exist or is too risky to attempt.

As for possible harm, any therapy has the potential for adverse reactions, but CAVM tends to be both gentle and harmonizing when applied correctly. A few patients may experience mild temporary worsening of symptoms as treatment begins to shift the disease process, but most do not. Also, CAVM practitioners are trained when not to apply a particular remedy (e.g. contraindications to

needling an area, herb-drug interactions, contraindications to certain herbs). As for not feeling comfortable with unfamiliar methods, questions are always welcome. Most CAVM practitioners are happy to chat with conventional colleagues about alternative care and provide educational handouts. Some veterinarians like myself also offer lectures for staff meetings, which can provide technicians and room assistants the chance to learn more about CAVM along with doctors.

Referrals from conventional colleagues are highly regarded, which calls for regular updates on patient progress, constructive collaboration on any changes in protocol, and referring patients back for routine care. Communication is critical, sometimes involving a network of multiple veterinarians when patients are also seeing several specialists as well as their conventional and CAVM vets. This may seem daunting, but the outcome can be a vibrant synergy of effort and knowledge producing beautiful results...and a wonderful professional camaraderie. So the next time you're thinking about NSAIDs for an arthritic patient, don't forget to consider CAVM!