

Tending the Wind – Chapter 2
Quality and Individuality
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Before discussing holistic veterinary methods, let's talk a little bit about holistic veterinarians – the people you'll be working with – because it's important to find one who not only knows their stuff, but with whom you feel comfortable. Medicine is only part of the healing process; the other part is the interplay between you, your pet, and your veterinarian.

All veterinarians, regardless of the methods they use, have received conventional training from a four-year accredited veterinary medical school. Some schools offer elective introductory courses in alternative medicine, but formal training requires attending additional courses after becoming a DVM. A few veterinary acupuncture courses are affiliated with schools, but most alternative programs are independent. Many, but not all, offer certification at the end of the course (and more letters after one's name). If you don't see the letters, it doesn't necessarily mean your veterinarian hasn't completed training in a particular area. It may simply mean those programs did not include a certification process.

Because veterinarians pursuing alternative training are already versed in anatomy and physiology, and have ample experience working with clients and patients, the courses are condensed and highly concentrated compared to many human alternative medical programs. Courses are designed for the working veterinarian who can't leave clients and patients for extended periods, and the focus is on essential theory and practical application. These courses also introduce students to the historical development and classical literature of the modality being taught. As with any educational program though, self-motivation beyond the classroom is the ultimate guide to learning. The wealth of classical and modern literature available for study as well as continuing education courses provide ample opportunities.

Many states allow human alternative practitioners to work on animals under the supervision of a veterinarian. This is especially helpful in areas where there just aren't enough vets offering alternative options. The ideal situation, however, is still to seek a veterinarian who has the additional training. The differences between animals and humans are significant. Animals have different disease processes, different behavior patterns and social challenges, different nutritional needs, and different lifestyles. The variance in anatomy and physiology between different animal species (and even between different breeds) is critical to proper evaluation and treatment.

Having found a veterinarian trained in alternative methods, how will you know they do good work, or that they'll be the right match for your pet? Anyone who's sought alternative care for themselves (and conventional care for that matter) knows it can take a few tries before you find someone who feels right. Degrees and certifications indicate training, but they don't necessarily guarantee quality. Plus, a veterinarian may offer alternative options but not have a truly holistic mindset. It helps to know what percentage of their practice is alternative; a vet whose practice is 80% alternative is going to have more experience than if it's 20%. A recommendation from a friend is certainly a good sign, and it helps to call and ask questions, but eventually you won't know until you go – particularly regarding bedside manner. For those changing to a different holistic veterinarian (after moving to a new city, for example) it's important to keep an open mind; your new vet most likely won't do things the same way you're old one did – which brings me to the issue of individuality.

Not everyone does things the same way, which is usually encouraged in our society; but when it comes to medical care, the push is to standardize rather than individualize. If a veterinarian doesn't follow the "standard of care," there's the potential for a lawsuit. People understandably want the sense of security and familiarity provided by standards, but for alternative methods to work optimally, such standardization is neither possible nor

desirable. By their very nature, these methods rely on the individuality of both patient and practitioner.

Let's take the situation of two 50-lb dogs diagnosed with hypothyroidism. The conventional treatment for both dogs, regardless of their individual traits, is the same basic drug and dosage regimen. Treated with Chinese herbs, acupuncture, or homeopathy, however, each dog would receive a different herbal formula, point selection, or homeopathic remedy based on their individual physical traits, history, personality, and lifestyle. Treatment is chosen for the whole unique being; the thyroid issue is only one part of that whole. This variance based on the individual patient makes it hard to conduct double-blind studies, but most people seeking alternative care expect it as essential and beneficial. What throws some clients off is that treatment also depends on the individuality of their holistic veterinarian. They want their new vet to use the same acupuncture points their old one did, but I suggest that the uniqueness of the practitioner is also an important aspect of holistic treatment.

You, your veterinarian, and your animal friend are all part of a whole circle of healing. This circle, at its best, creates an atmosphere of mutual empowerment, which is the basis of the most profound health. The ancient Daoist philosophers had a term for this – *zìrán* – whose meaning is variously translated as *spontaneously so*, *naturally so*, *self-so-ing*, *self-deriving*. It is the tendency of our true selves to emerge naturally and in harmony with our environment when there is no pressure to fit a mold or match an expectation. This is an ongoing process in each moment, and is the guiding principle of true health. When we allow ourselves to discover our unique path in a genuinely caring manner without judgment, we assist others to do the same in the most effective way: both by intent and by example. There will always be differences between one practitioner and another, but these differences can be a source of innovation rather than consternation.

In summary, here are some essential things to look for in a holistic veterinarian: training, experience, enthusiasm, a gentle and caring manner, a holistic mindset, and an attitude engendering empowerment for both you and your animal friend. In this way, even the most difficult illness can be an opportunity for healing.