

Style

# Pet acupuncture more popular as practice becomes more mainstream

By Emily Wax May 22, 2012

One afternoon, as Heather Schoell was having porcupine-quill-like needles inserted into her feet, she casually mentioned to her acupuncturist that Cashew, her floppy-eared beagle, was suffering from anxiety.

Recently adopted from a kill shelter in rural Virginia, Cashew was fearful around other dogs at the Capitol Hill park near Schoell's home. An emaciated 15 pounds when Schoell took him in, he scavenged food from the trash can and kitchen counters.

“Well, have you considered acupuncture?” Schoell recalled the acupuncturist asking. “I said, ‘You mean, like, for a *dog*? Uh, no!’ But then I thought, ‘Well, it worked so well for me — why not?’”

Increasingly, pet owners like Schoell are turning to the ancient Chinese medical practice for treatment of their cat's asthma, their rabbit's head-and-neck strain or their canine's hip dysplasia.

The practice has become more popular as acupuncture for humans has become more mainstream, said Simon Flynn, executive director of the American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture. This year, the nonprofit group has a membership of 800 veterinary acupuncturists, compared with about 200 a decade ago, Flynn said.

“There's such substantial growth in veterinary acupuncture, and it's driven by pet owners who had acupuncture and want their pets to have the same kind of therapy,” Flynn said. (Veterinary acupuncture was approved as an “alternate therapy” in 1988 by the American Veterinary Medical Association.)

This raises the question: Do we have boundary issues with our pets? Perhaps. When we see a human trend on the rise, it's a safe bet that a companion-animal trend will follow. Think: dog therapy, pet spas, organic pet food and yoga classes known as “doga,” for, yes, dogs and their human partners. (Please refer to the book [“Barking Buddha: Simple Soul Stretches for Yogi and Dogi.”](#))

“It became a quality-of-life issue,” says Schoell, 40. “If your dog is anxiety-ridden, it's going to make you anxiety-ridden.”

Shortly afterward, she and Cashew were in the flower-framed entryway of Greta McVey's brick Cape Cod in College Park. McVey is one of the region's best-known pet acupuncturists. Maryland is the only state that allows non-veterinarians to practice acupuncture. Licensed acupuncturists are permitted to treat pets after obtaining an additional 140-hour certification in animal acupuncture.

McVey, 53, speaks in a low Southern drawl and has a tendency to ask pets how they are feeling before she asks their owners. A curly-haired woman with soft blue eyes, McVey hails from the coal mining town of Cedar Bluff, Va., and is descended from a long line of country doctors and healers — "Mama's grandfather was a vet."

McVey's 30-minute sessions cost about \$75, which is standard in the industry, and are much like acupuncture for humans — including the insertion of tiny needles into specific points on the body. Animal acupuncturists say they can treat an array of maladies, from emotional trauma like Cashew's to a parakeet's stomach woes or a rabbit's hind-limb paralysis. McVey stresses that her treatments are meant to complement, not replace, veterinary medicine.

"The first thing to understand when thinking about this is that the pet is viewed as a part of the American family," said Stanley Coren, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and author of 14 books on dogs, including "The Pawprints of History: Dogs and the Course of Human Events." "Right now there's a great romance for natural and traditional medicines, so that means that Lassie is also going to end up on an acupuncturist's table. There's an awful lot we do for our pets that are really things we do or want to do for ourselves."

Acupuncture came to this country after Washington and Beijing opened relations during the Nixon administration, said Vikki Weber, executive director of the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society in Fort Collins, Colo.

"You didn't even hear about acupuncture in America until the 1970s, let alone acupuncture for animals," Weber said. "Then some Chinese acupuncturists came to UCLA's pain management center, where they trained physicians to use acupuncture in labs, using dogs. The American physicians realized that the dogs were actually getting results, and they contacted veterinarians."

Since 1974, IVAS has trained 6,000 veterinarians worldwide in animal acupuncture, Weber said. The society's training has slowly grown more popular over the years, but took off in the past decade as Americans became more interested in acupuncture for their own ailments. The association does not track the number of animals being treated.

"But classes a few years ago used to draw about 15 people," Weber said. "At a recent class we held in Portland, 110 people showed up."

Animal acupuncturist Tom Ingegno in Baltimore even treated Gretchen, an aging giraffe at the Maryland Zoo, for chronic arthritis. To ease the pain, Ingegno inserted needles into Gretchen's legs, lower back and neck.

"You would see her relax and switch from a flight-or-fight-mode into a rest-and-digest mode and after a treatment she would eat and be more mobile," he said. "But our goal with Gretchen was pain management because she was put down a month later because she was over 23, which is like being very elderly."

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Ingegno also treats rabbits, including Tinkerbell, who is a sanctuary rabbit at the [House Rabbit Society of Maryland](#), D.C. and Northern Virginia.

Tinkerbell had an infection that caused what's known as head tilt, said Kathleen Wilsbach, chapter manager of the House Rabbit Society.

"It didn't cure her, totally," Wilsbach said. "But now she holds her head much higher and she's a lot more mobile. So it improved her quality of life."

Veterinarian Toni Connell of the Independent Hill Veterinary Clinic in Manassas has been a veterinarian since 1979. In 2004, she invested the 160 hours needed in Virginia to earn a license in veterinary acupuncture. It's akin to a dentist learning to give Botox injections, a skill that can bring in a healthy wave of business.

"It's been very helpful for treating cats with chronic upper respiratory diseases, and we just don't have anything in traditional medicine that works for them," she said.

Pet acupuncture, of course, attracts its share of skeptics.

IVAS's Weber thinks that animals should be treated only by veterinarians who are trained in acupuncture.

"Human acupuncturists are trained to treat humans," Weber said. "A vet is much more qualified to treat an animal and has much more training."

And of course, some critics say acupuncture is an unproven treatment, for both pets and humans.

"There's actually no logical reason to believe that sticking needles into any human or animal can have the slightest influence on any disease and make hormones or antibodies behave differently," said Stephen Barrett, a retired psychiatrist who runs "Quackwatch," a Web site that questions the scientific value of and research on everything from aromatherapy to St. John's wort. "The most that can be hoped for is acupuncture can distract people and relieve some pain, but there's not real evidence that this has practical value. And there's just not enough studies on animal acupuncture, and why would there be?"

The American Medical Association takes no specific position on acupuncture, but says that "there is little evidence to confirm the safety or efficacy of most alternative therapies." It says more "stringently controlled research should be done" to determine whether it is useful.

But Schoell and others who have used the treatment for their pets say they are convinced.

On a recent Wednesday morning, McVey walked Cashew and Schoell into her backyard garden. Cashew chased a bug through the tulips as the wind chimes jingled. "It helps you relax, being outside, right?" McVey said. Schoell talked about how Cashew might have been lost or abandoned before being adopted, causing him to suffer rattled nerves.

So they walked Cashew down into McVey's salmon-colored basement, where she examined his coat and took his pulse. This was Cashew's third session; the dog is also seeing a trainer, and Schoell believes the combination has helped calm his fears.

Then McVey began. As the dog rested on her carpet, she gently stuck thin, light needles about the diameter of a whisker into points on his chest and back. Cashew didn't seem bothered by the needles at all — he started to look drowsy, as if he was about to segue into a nap.

“You can see his eyes soften and his ears lower down where as before he was holding everything at attention like he had his armor on,” said McVey.

The entire process lasted about 30 minutes. Then back to the garden. Cashew seemed as relaxed as a person would be after a massage. McVey bent down to pet his belly.

“Okay, boy, off you go into this beautiful day.”

 **60 Comments**

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