This won't hurt a bit
More veterinarians offer acupuncture as alternative for pets in need of pain relief
By Susan Chaitlyn Lebovits, Globe Correspondent | January 25, 2009

Organic pet food, dog playgroups - in many homes, four-legged creatures are treated like an equal member of the family. And as more people embrace Eastern medicine, they're also doing so for their pets.

Dr. Edward Leonard has been practicing pet acupuncture at Slade Veterinary Hospital in Framingham for the past six years.

His most common patients are older, arthritic animals, though he also treats disc disease, paralysis, and allergies.

He's even treated a few dogs with cancer - not as a cure, he's quick to explain, but to keep them as vital and comfortable as possible.

"Some owners bring in their pets when they haven't found relief in any other way," said Leonard, a veterinarian for more than three decades. "Others want to provide a holistic or natural treatment, or combine therapies."

Classical music fills Leonard's homey office. Books such as "Chicken Soup for the Dog & Cat Lover's Soul," and Cat Fancy and Natural Dog magazines sit on a table in the waiting room, and small bags of kibble and dried duck treats are within reach.

On a recent Wednesday, Leonard examined Jesse, a 100-pound pooch who is a mix of Leonberger, St. Bernard, and Labrador retriever. Jesse has arthritis and degenerative joint disease, and had her right hip replaced. Leonard, who charges $56 for an office visit, checked the pulse in Jesse's back leg, looked at the color of her tongue, and gently felt around for painful spots, which became obvious when Jesse winced.

"These are all indicators of what the animal's condition is," he said. "After I treat them with acupuncture I can often see an immediate difference in tongue color and circulation improves, which I can feel in their pulse."

The slender needles are identical to those for humans. Generally Leonard leaves the needles in for 15 minutes, although he said that toward the end of a treatment, some animals will try to pull or shake them out in the same way they remove excess water after coming out of a bath.

Jesse's owner, Sarah Booth, a senior scientist and director of the Vitamin K Laboratory at Tufts University, said she's been very satisfied. "Our dog seems to have benefited tremendously from treatment," the Framingham resident said.

Animal acupuncture has been gaining popularity this decade, both locally and nationally.

Vikki Webber, director of the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society in Fort Collins, Colo., said student enrollment there has tripled since 2002.

"We've been teaching a certification course since 1974, and for three decades we were the only ones offering such a certification," Webber said. "Now there are two additional institutions, and between all of us we educate at least 300 students a year."
Dr. Revital Kastner, a 2003 graduate of Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, and the owner of Park Street Veterinary Clinic in North Reading, has been certified in pet acupuncture since 2007. Kastner said she treats about 10 patients a month.

"I used to have to tell people about acupuncture and convince them that it could help," said Kastner. "Now people ask me about it and come in specifically because they've heard that I use that modality."

Some animals respond to acupuncture right away, Kastner said, but she cautions that it's not a quick fix. Like Leonard, Kastner says pet owners should be prepared to commit to at least three to four sessions before deciding if it's right for their pet. Kastner charges $65 per acupuncture treatment, $57 for a regular visit.


"I had initially wanted to go to veterinary school but after working with many veterinarians I realized that I could not euthanize an animal," she said. "I felt acupuncture was a different way to help animals."

Dr. Donna Blasko, a Medford veterinarian who also works at Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Center of New England in Waltham, said she has taken classes in pet acupuncture and is also board certified in human acupuncture. Having been trained in Western medicine, Blasko admits that she was once a skeptic.

"Seeing results in animals, whom I think are impartial to placebo, has convinced me that it is an effective modality for wellness and improving quality of life, whatever state of health that life may be in at the moment," Blasko said.

Leonard also makes the crossover from pet acupuncture to human - on himself.

"If I'm having dental work done, I'm likely to use pressure points on my hand to relieve pain," said Leonard. "And on the occasions where I have pain going down my leg, I'll use the acupuncture needles."

Leonard first became interested in veterinary medicine in high school, when his parents asked him to take the family dog for his shots. He was premed at the University of Dayton in the late 1960s and joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps. He was a captain in the US Army Veterinary Corps until 1975, spending three years working in a clinic in Germany that provided care for 150 sentry dogs.

He worked as a veterinarian in Salem for two years, then moved to Wayland and opened a private practice in Natick. From 1980 to 1995, Leonard was the director of veterinary medicine for the Animal Rescue League of Boston. He has been at Slade for more than a decade. Leonard said he became interested in pet acupuncture in the mid-1980s, as he found treating the body without medication intriguing.

He began with pet acupressure, using a few points for dental pain during tooth extractions, and in 2002 took pet acupuncture classes at Tufts' Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in Grafton. Leonard is also certified in tuina, a Chinese medical veterinary massage.

Even with all that healing knowledge at his fingertips, Leonard said, he does not offer his services...
to friends.

"My wife is the only human that I'll work on."

Susan Chaityn Lebovits can be reached at lebovits@globe.com.