

When and Why Chiropractic? Referring Vets Need to Know.

When veterinary clients ask for chiropractic referrals, what's the appropriate response? In light of the liability issues involved, as well as the pervasive unknowns about the safety and efficacy of chiropractic for animals, veterinarians should carefully consider several factors before making a referral. This includes taking into account the possibility that a less forceful treatment such as massage or acupuncture, might be more suitable for that animal.

Chiropractic adjustments usually involve short lever, high velocity controlled thrusts done by hand. Some chiropractors apply the thrusts with an activator, which is a small hand-held instrument. Thrusting forces required vary with the size of the animal and the type of joint undergoing treatment, and thrusts are not innocuous. A heavy-handed individual can seriously harm or even kill an animal. Even milder thrusts may injure animals weakened by age, joint pathology, osteopenia, neoplasia, and more. Chiropractors wielding hammers and 2 X 4's are obviously problematic. If the chiropractor muscle-tests the client (who becomes a surrogate for the animal) and thereupon recommends diet changes, nutraceuticals, and homeopathic remedies, the veterinarian should be able to appreciate, without much difficulty, the nonsense of such an approach, and take appropriate action, as the veterinarian is ultimately liable for the supervised chiropractor's actions.

How effective is it, and when is chiropractic indicated? A conservative list of potential chiropractic indications for dogs and cats comes from one of the leading veterinary manual therapy researchers, Kevin K. Haussler, DVM, DC, PhD: neck or back pain or stiffness; inability to sit straight; reduced flexibility; muscle spasms; poor performance; difficulty going up or down stairs, inability to walk or run in a straight line, and abnormal tail carriage. In contrast, Taylor and Romano, in the October 1999 issue of the *Canadian Veterinary Journal*, list as chiropractic indications: lameness, intervertebral disc disease, wobbler syndrome/cervical vertebral "insufficiency", cauda equina syndrome, sciatic and brachial neuralgia, urinary incontinence, sensory and glandular neuropathies, and any organ pathology. Every one of Taylor and Romano's recommendations is unsubstantiated by satisfactory evidence, even in the human literature, where the only condition for which chiropractic has moderate research support is acute, midline, low back pain with no neurologic symptoms. In a 1988 guest editorial in the *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics*, widely acclaimed chiropractic critic Joseph C. Keating, Jr., PhD stated, "The reality is that no claims for spinal adjusting are justified at this time." This largely remains the case today, even sixteen years later, and is unquestionably true for animal chiropractic. Further, Keating continues, "Making unjustified claims is pervasive in chiropractic, and cuts across several traditional dividing lines' for the effectiveness and efficacy of their methods, for the relative merits of one technique over another (or all others), for both the therapeutic and

the prophylactic value of adjusting, and for the superiority of chiropractic vs. medical methods of healing.” Fortunately, case reports on manual therapy treatments are starting to emerge in the veterinary literature, on conditions such as canine lick granuloma and the use of objective kinematic measurements of spinal motion following manipulation for equine back pain. Certainly though, rigorous, controlled trials are the ultimate goal.

In the meantime, veterinarians must continue to assert their legal right to decide whether to refer an animal for chiropractic, in the face of formidable challenges across the country. If veterinarians abdicate their position of authority in determining the types of treatments animals receive, both animal and public health will suffer. Furthermore, if veterinarians lose their sole gatekeeper status, the profession will witness an even more rapid influx of the gamut of human healthcare providers into the veterinary profession than that currently underway, with acupuncturists and physical therapists joining chiropractors in the move to eliminate the need for veterinary referral and supervision across the country.

Veterinarians have a tough road ahead, since the urge to treat animals even without veterinary supervision is strong, as in the case of Colorado chiropractor Jay Komarek, as reported in the *Durango Herald* in March 2004. In this article entitled, “Chiropractor willing to break law to help animals”, Komarek claims that he “must” treat animals during chiropractic “emergencies” even if it means practicing without a veterinarian present. In fact, there are NO chiropractic emergencies. What neurologic compromise or musculoskeletal pain would be so severe that applying force to the spine without a veterinary evaluation would be warranted? Appropriate pre-chiropractic workups include complete history and physical examination by a veterinarian, along with necessary diagnostic tests that may include, but are not limited to, radiographs and possibly magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). **A 1999 study by Levitski et al. in *Veterinary Radiology and Ultrasound* showed that of 27 dogs with neck pain or cervical myelopathy, the majority of dogs displayed profound pathology. Disorders included intervertebral disc disease, intradural extramedullary mass lesions, nerve root tumors, hydromyelia/syringomyelia, and an intramedullary ring enhancing lesion, extradural synovial cysts, and extradural compressive lesions. Most of the dogs underwent surgery.**

At a time when growing numbers of human healthcare consumers are calling for an abrupt halt to chiropractic neck manipulation citing disturbing rates of strokes and deaths following treatment, both chiropractors and veterinarians referring for chiropractic care should be extra conscientious about ensuring that animals can safely receive treatment *before* it begins.