

Alternative therapy:

a gentle and kind approach to cancer treatment

By Wendy Dudley

Pet guardians often turn to holistic medicine as a last resort to save their animals, but those who walk through the doors of Dr. Steve Marsden's Edmonton Holistic Veterinary Clinic seek alternative treatment as a first choice. When it comes to treating dogs and cats with cancer, Marsden knows he cannot save every case — just as conventional treatment cannot guarantee a positive outcome — but he does know the pet will not suffer.

"A lot of our pet (guardians) know someone who has gone through chemo and they were not impressed, so they want to go to alternative because there are no adverse effects, no side effects whatsoever."

Considered a world expert in holistic medicine, Marsden spends much of his time educating veterinarians about alternative therapies. While Edmonton Holistic is not the only Alberta clinic offering alternative remedies, it is one of few where the majority of pets are treated with herbs, acupuncture, diet and supplements. These are the pillars of Marsden's treatment. "What makes us unique is how much we rely on alternative medicine to treat everything. There is no condition where we assume conventional treatment is necessary."

Marsden was trained in conventional vet medicine, then became a naturopath physician and acupuncturist, adapting what he learned to animals. "We always combine conventional with alternative, as alternative always brings something to the table." Alternative can be the sole treatment, or done in conjunction with conventional treatment, such as surgery. "For example, we may do surgery to remove most of a tumour, and then we will use herbs to prevent the growth from returning or to get part of the tumour we didn't get. There are also certain plants that can enhance the effectiveness of chemo or radiation, and can help reduce side effects." For nasal or brain tumours, he relies on herbs alone, rather than surgery.

The clinic imports its herbs from China, and they are then blended into formulas that target cancers in certain parts of the body. Each blend varies according to the tumour's location, such as whether the masses are above or below the abdomen, Marsden said.

Using plants for their healing powers dates back thousands of years, and even today, many drugs are still derived from plants, such as Taxol which is used to treat prostate cancer, Marsden noted.

Disease can also arise from circulation abnormalities, which herbs and acupuncture can help improve. Acupuncture also can help reduce side effects and boost energy levels. One type of tumour thrives on blood supply while another tries to hide from it, Marsden said. "Acupuncture helps manipulate circulation."

While not substitutes for veterinary care, Reiki and massage are appropriate complementary therapies, said Pamela Porosky of the Calgary-based The Raven's Wing Animal Reiki and Massage.

Reiki, an energy-based therapy that can reduce stress and anxiety while providing deep relaxation, can bring relief to animals before, during and after cancer treatment, said Porosky. "It is non-invasive with no ill effects. It can provide relief from pain and discomfort, as well as a faster rate of healing because, when the body is in a deep state of relaxation, the healing process can begin."

Recently, the American Cancer Society conducted studies on the benefits of Reiki therapy in people suffering from prostate cancer and learned that it can have a profound and beneficial effect, especially in regards to the side effects from chemotherapy and certain cancer medications, Porosky said.

Massage, on the other hand, is only given when approved by a vet, as massage can have a negative effect on some types of cancer, she noted. Massage is more invasive, and can affect every part of the body through manipulation of the skin, muscles and connective tissues. In doing so, it boosts the circulatory and immune systems. "In the case of terminal cancer, however, treatment at any time would be at the discretion of the (guardian). For some, being able to provide pain relief and the soothing benefits of massage outweigh the consequences the treatment may have," Porosky said.

Another key to cancer treatment, as well as prevention, is diet, said Dr. Wanda Vockeroth who practices alternative medicine at the Marda Loop Veterinary Centre in Calgary. "Even if you are feeding the best quality pet food, it is not the same as fresh food. It would be like thinking you will be healthy because you eat three good quality TV dinners a day. It is still processed food."

Research from Colorado State University has shown a low carbohydrate diet helps starve cancer cells, she said. Either home-made food or raw food patties with bone and organ meats (which can be purchased at many quality pet food stores) will provide a complete high protein diet. Tumours like sugar so only carbohydrates with a low glycemic index, such as peas, should be fed. Vockeroth also suggested salmon oil for Omega-3 fatty acids and coloured vegetables and berries for antioxidants.

Antioxidants help prevent cancer, and also reduce inflammation associated with some tumours such as skin and bone cancer, said Marsden.

Immune systems are boosted by certain herbs and Reishi and Shiitake mushrooms, said Vockeroth who recalls several cases where diet, herbs and homeopathic remedies saved dogs that were close to death. Research also shows that herbs do not interfere with chemo treatments, as some conventional veterinarians once thought they did, she said.

The cost of alternative treatment averages between 10 to 20 per cent the cost of chemotherapy and radiation, but most guardians choose alternative because of their concern about quality of life. "Some times the pets may not live any longer but because our treatment has no side effects, it is so gratifying for people to see their pets not feeling bad, and still chasing squirrels and birds, and still going on walks," Marsden said.