Developments in Veterinary Acupuncture

Samantha Scott

Summary
Veterinary acupuncture has been developing rapidly in recent years. Public attention has been focused on acupuncture as a possible therapeutic intervention for their pets by the media. Interest in acupuncture from the veterinary profession has therefore been primarily driven by owner demand. Veterinarians are now seeking courses in acupuncture that are relevant to themselves as general practitioners rather than as specialists in complementary medicine. Evidence of the efficacy of acupuncture in treating any of the veterinary species is limited, so it is significant that two acupuncture-related trials at Glasgow University Veterinary School are currently receiving funding.

Keywords
Acupuncture, veterinary practice, pain, acral lick dermatitis.

Veterinary Acupuncture
It is generally accepted that acupuncture has been used in animals for as long as it has been practised in humans and that its origins and course of development closely parallel that of human acupuncture.1 Point and meridian charts are available for the veterinary species, but there is controversy about point location and the concept of meridians in animals, even from a traditional standpoint. Since, in the East, animals are considered not to possess souls, they cannot have circulating ‘Qi’ and therefore meridians are an irrelevance. It would seem that the pragmatic approach of needling the painful areas, rather than careful anatomical and meridian based selection of acupoints, has long been the practice of Chinese acupuncturists when treating animals. The position of acupuncture points in animals is currently under debate, since some charts have been drawn by transposing point positions from humans to the nearest anatomical location in animals, whilst some are the result of a more empirical approach. Clearly, simple anatomical transposition is not always logical given the anatomical and postural differences between the species. This is especially the case for some points considered to be of major significance in humans such as LR3 and LI4. These have no anatomical equivalent in some of the veterinary species. The lower leg of the horse consists of the third metacarpal or metatarsal and phalanx, having only vestigial second and fourth metacarpal or metatarsal bones. Attempting to needle the anatomical equivalent of LR3 would be clearly impossible.

Figure 1. Most dogs accept acupuncture treatment well. This saluki has needles in LI11 and BL54/40 bilaterally.
nonsensical, although it would at least have the merit of being safe for both veterinarian and patient, since one would be needling thin air.

**Veterinary Acupuncture in Practice**

The clinical application of veterinary acupuncture has been largely borrowed from the practice of human acupuncture. In spite of this, the treatment reaction and responses of animals to acupuncture closely parallel those of human patients. Treatments usually last from ten to twenty minutes and are carried out on a weekly or a twice weekly basis for the first four to six weeks, during which time it is expected that a response to therapy will occur. Sedation is rarely needed to facilitate treatment (see figure 1).

Animals appear to be divided into strong reactors (perceived as those who become heavily sedated during treatment) and strong responders (perceived as those in whom a rapid and dramatic improvement of clinical signs is observed), and those who react moderately to treatment and respond slowly, with a cumulative response to each treatment. In common with some human patients, some animals are sensitive to treatment and require only a brief needling with fine needles, whilst others require stronger stimulation before they respond. Although some animals appear to be temporarily worse after treatment, there are no reports of cathartic reactions in animals. Since animals can neither laugh nor cry it is intriguing to imagine what form this catharsis might take should it occur.

What is interesting to note is that most patients, however nervous and reluctant they first appear to be when receiving acupuncture, become increasingly confident and relaxed with subsequent treatments. This could be as a result of an association with the process of receiving treatment and the production of mood altering neurotransmitters during and immediately after acupuncture. From the veterinarian’s point of view this makes acupuncture a rewarding therapy since, for once, their patients are not attempting to escape, bite them, or climb into their owner’s pocket. Not surprisingly, owners are more willing to bring their pet for treatment because the experience appears to be a positive one for the animal.

Although ‘success’ rates for veterinary acupuncture are estimated to be similar to those for treating humans, i.e. around 70%, assessing the response of an animal to acupuncture is sometimes problematic. The most frequently offered comment by the owner is that the animal ‘appears to feel much better in himself’. It could be argued that this improvement in demeanour is a reflection of an altered owner perception of the clinical problem now that it has been addressed to their satisfaction. A more positive and confident attitude by the owner can have significant effects on their pet’s behaviour. Scoring systems such as visual analogue scales and charts are gradually being more widely used in veterinary practice. Validation of acute and chronic pain scales for use in general practice is the subject of current research at Glasgow University Veterinary School and it is hoped that these scales will be able to help veterinarians with their perennial problem of treating patients who cannot talk.

**Public Interest in Acupuncture**

Whilst raising the collective blood pressure of the profession, the glut of veterinary and animal programmes shown on television has served to highlight a range of therapies available to owners for their pets. Having succeeded in never watching any of these programmes, this author can only report being told that acupuncture treatment is regularly featured. Popular animal magazines and the general press also run stories, individual case reports and features on local veterinarians practising acupuncture. It would seem that all things complementary are good copy in the present climate. The Association of British Veterinary Acupuncturists (ABVA) receives numerous calls from members of the public either enquiring about acupuncture in general or wanting to find a veterinarian in their area who can treat their pet. Owners who have received acupuncture themselves are often keen
to find similar treatment for their pet, whether or not they obtained relief from their own symptoms.

**Veterinary Associations**

ABVA is the only veterinary association with a major interest in acupuncture. The association currently has 131 members. In 1998 ABVA became affiliated to the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, a mainstream and prestigious veterinary association. This affiliation has various advantages for ABVA, not least of which is the conferred ‘respectability’ of an established association.

**Veterinary Interest in Acupuncture**

The veterinary profession is still divided about the use of complementary medicine in general, although the impression gained by this author is that acupuncture is accepted as a valid treatment more readily than is homeopathy. Interest in veterinary acupuncture appears to be largely driven by public demand and by an increase in coverage of the subject in the veterinary press. Although there have always been a small but steady number of veterinarians wishing to learn acupuncture, it has only been in the last few years that this number has risen markedly. Instead of acupuncture being seen as a major change in career direction to an exclusively specialist field, veterinarians are now interested in learning a new skill that can be used in everyday practice, especially for the treatment of musculoskeletal pain.

**Pain in the Veterinary Species**

The veterinary pharmaceutical companies have recently launched major initiatives in pain recognition and pain management. These have consisted of road shows and seminars, hosted by the company, but featuring experts in pain, pharmacology, anaesthesia, behaviour, and orthopaedics, lecturing on the current state of knowledge of chronic and acute pain in animals. Pain management in general and pain clinics in particular have been a hot topic, although they have not been incorporated into veterinary practices as much as had been hoped. The veterinarians are now primed to recognise and treat pain more readily, but the public need to be educated that, in all probability, their pets suffer from the pain of musculoskeletal conditions with the same frequency and severity as their owners. This can be a difficult message to get across. Owners in general do not want to consider the notion of their pet suffering. Compounding this denial by the owners is the difficulty of recognising pain in the veterinary species. For different reasons it is not in the interests of either a prey species (e.g. the horse) or a predator species (e.g. the dog) to communicate the fact that they are in pain and therefore vulnerable. Their motivation to perform certain behaviours is clearly different from that of humans and they will, in some cases, play and exercise despite being in pain. The recognition of pain in animals depends largely on observation of changes in their behaviour and the correct interpretation of those changes.

**Acupuncture Courses for Veterinarians**

Until 1998, there was only one veterinary acupuncture course in the UK. In 1998, ABVA launched the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS) course at Exeter University. This is the only recognised and accredited veterinary acupuncture course, although it is not recognised by the veterinary professional body. The uptake for this course, which has now moved to Bristol, has been good, but there is dissatisfaction with the high proportion of traditional Chinese medicine taught and required to pass the examinations. The contents of this course and the current affiliation with the IVAS accreditation process are currently being reviewed by ABVA. Meanwhile, ABVA has also recently run the first ‘western approach’ veterinary acupuncture course and the plan is to run these in various locations, so that learning acupuncture is accessible to as many veterinarians as possible.

**Legal Aspects of Veterinary Acupuncture**

Under the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) it is unlawful for anyone other than a qualified
veterinary surgeon to carry out an ‘act of veterinary surgery’. The current position of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is that acupuncture is an act of veterinary surgery. Therefore, no one other than a veterinarian should treat an animal with acupuncture, and this includes physiotherapists working under veterinary supervision. Whilst the notion that vets can treat humans, but medical doctors cannot treat animals continues to cause both amusement and irritation in some quarters, the point is that animals cannot choose their therapist or mode of treatment and therefore need a greater degree of protection.

Clinical Trials

Although, in common with medical doctors, anecdote and clinical experience convince many veterinarians of the merits (and demerits) of any given therapy, evidence based medicine is regarded as the way ahead in the veterinary as well as in the medical profession. To this end, there are currently two acupuncture related trials running at Glasgow University Veterinary School.

The first is a randomised controlled trial comparing the treatment of canine acral lick dermatitis (ALD) by the standard best therapy (antibiosis) alone with acupuncture plus antibiotics. Both the assessors and owners will be blinded to which treatment group the animal belongs. This condition, regarded as a common psychodermatosis,2 is notoriously difficult to treat in practice, but appears to respond dramatically well to acupuncture. Although ALD is instantly recognisable as such, (see figure 2) and it was thought that its relatively standard appearance would make it an ideal candidate for investigation and assessment, its aetiology is not straightforward. The first task in the trial is to identify those lesions thought to be caused by behavioural problems, since there are numerous clinical disorders that can give rise to ALD. Only the so-called idiopathic ALD lesions will be entered in the trial. It may be that this trial will yield more information about the nature of ALD than it will about acupuncture. What is significant about this trial is that the Kennel Club of Great Britain has generously funded the research.

The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy (ACPAT) has funded the Glasgow based research into myofascial pain in dogs. Although most veterinary acupuncturists and physiotherapists recognise the presence of myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) in animals, and assume that they are clinically relevant, this has never been proven. Case series have been described in the veterinary literature,3;4 but these do not demonstrate that MTrPs can be found by any examiner. Based on the interrater reliability study by Gerwin et al,5 an attempt will be made to demonstrate the presence of MTrPs in animals after training veterinary orthopaedic surgeons and neurologists in their identification. Of course, it is always possible, that this work will tell us more about orthopaedic surgeons and neurologists than it will about trigger points.

The Future

ABVA eventually aims to have its own UK accreditation system. Ideally this would be recognised by the professional body, but that is an unlikely scenario in the immediate future.

This particular author’s vision of the undiscovered country is that all veterinary schools
will eventually teach acupuncture as part of the undergraduate curriculum. Veterinary education is changing rapidly and the curriculum is currently overcrowded, so this plan may be sometime in reaching fruition; however, if the result is that more animals have access veterinarians with a greater potential to relieve pain and improve welfare, then, like most good things, it will be worth being pushy and proactive to achieve.

Reference list

Developments in veterinary acupuncture

Samantha Scott

doi: 10.1136/aim.19.1.27

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://aim.bmj.com/content/19/1/27

These include:

**Email alerting service**
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://www.bmj.com/company/products-services/rights-and-licensing/

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/content/subscribers

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/