

Holistic science in veterinary medicine, animal husbandry and management

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

INTEGRATED MEDICINE

In many Western societies we think of disease as a failure of the body to do what we require of it – it is seen as merely an inconvenience, rather than a sign that something is out of balance. This attitude is relatively new, beginning in the twentieth century with the rise of modern science. It springs from our mechanistic modern Western approach concerning the way the body works.

According to this way of looking at health, the answer to a particular problem seems to lie in suppressing the symptoms, which is often possible with modern sophisticated pharmacy products. Constant suppression of physical symptoms without tackling the underlying cause, can add to the patient's problem rather than cure them. The general feeling now is that pharmacy products, effective as they may be, are overused.

The situation is rather different in many undeveloped cultures as well as in some sophisticated Eastern societies, as it was in the West until the development of the modern drug industry. They have a more holistic or integrated approach. The disease is not seen as just a collection of symptoms to be alleviated, but as an indicator that something is fundamentally wrong and out of balance with the whole organism. The physician will of course attempt to alleviate the symptoms, but also try to establish and treat the cause of the problem in the widest sense. The basic idea is that an organism in balance naturally strives to be well; all that should be required is that the barriers to healing are identified and removed. The onset of disease, whether clinical or sub-clinical, is seen as the result of a complexity of factors, which may be related to such things as environment, diet and emotional state, all of which should be considered within the whole.

Prevention of disease is also taken seriously, whereas until very recently scant attention has been paid to this in most Western countries and even now this basic idea is resisted even at the most basic level. Apart from the improved well-being of the population, the savings to the nation's health budget would be enormous if proper attention was paid to integrated treatment and disease prevention. Increasing obesity is a case in point, where a complexity of psychological, environmental and dietary factors has been identified as causative factors.

Integrated medicine is based on a strategy which identifies and treats the cause of the problem as well as the symptoms. Although most practitioners of this approach tend to favour traditional 'non-technological' products such as herbal medicine, they will also make use of modern sophisticated drugs where appropriate. Stress, environment and diet are all considered and each factor is seen as equally important in the treatment. All these principles of course can be applied to animal as well as human health and welfare. Those interested in the subject are encouraged to go to Prince Charles' Foundation for Integrated Medicine website www.fim.co.uk.

The 'big four' therapies commonly employed in complementary and alternative medicine all of which are being used in an integrated approach to health, are herbal medicine, acupuncture, homoeopathy and physiotherapy but there are many others. Nutritional therapy is amongst those gaining greater recognition. All of these are specialist subjects and cover a great deal of ground. A veterinary surgeon on qualifying is educated mainly in the use of modern pharmacy to treat the symptoms of disease and must study the others if he is to become proficient at them.

Briefly, the big four therapies are:

1. Homoeopathy: A system of treating disease by using highly diluted substances which, in their undiluted state, are able to excite symptoms in a healthy body similar to the disease being treated. The scientific explanation of how homoeopathy works is a subject for discussion and argument – but there is little doubt of its effectiveness in skilled hands. Homoeopathic nosodes are a safe alternative to vaccination with conventional vaccines where appropriate.
2. Herbal medicine: Modern medicine has its roots in products made from herbs and many modern drugs are still derived from them. The benefit of using whole herbs rather than drugs is that in skilled hands there are fewer side effects. The action of herbs varies greatly from say opium, which used to be the sheet anchor of the medical profession to milder herbs such as ginger and fenugreek, both of which are effective digestive aids.
3. Acupuncture: A system of medicine which relies on re-balancing the vital energies of the body through stimulation of various points in the body, usually through insertions of tiny fine needles. Strictly, acupuncture is an energy medicine which works at deep levels within the body. Acupuncture can be put to dramatic use in the control of pain and has famously been used as the only means of anaesthetic in major surgery in human patients.
4. Physiotherapy: Physiotherapy consists of several disciplines, each with individual methods, but the basic principle is concerned with effecting a beneficial change within the skeletal and/or muscular systems within the body. The idea being that disease is related to misalignment of

these structures which can be returned to normal working order usually through physical manipulations.

There is of course a very high standard required amongst the veterinary profession relating to their main areas of expertise, but they may have little or no knowledge about the others therapies. Oddly enough, the law allows veterinary surgeons with no formal training in the therapies mentioned above in order to use them. It is up to the client to satisfy themselves that the veterinary surgeon has the expertise being sought. One of the best recommendations is word of mouth. Most who are offering such therapies as part of their treatment have either studied the subject at post graduate level themselves, or work with specialists who they will refer the client to.

Other subjects, which are part of integrated medicine, and lie firmly within the responsibility of the animal owner, are stress, environmental issues and of course, diet. These areas hold great potential for preventing disease, all of which should be considered within the context of the animal's evolved physiology and psychology. Natural feeding is recommended for all species and BAHNM certified commercial foods are now freely available for dogs and horses.

For free technical information on integrated medicine and advice in specific circumstances contact: tech.help@bahnm.org.uk

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