

Lessons Reinforced By Four Legged Patients

by Tom Ingegno M.S., L.Ac.

I have recently had the pleasure of taking an extremely intensive, but enjoyable, life enriching course which will allow me to expand my practice in a different direction. With the completion of a course in animal acupuncture I am honored to be able to work on companion animals such as; horses, dogs, cats, rabbits, ferrets, and even the occasional parrot. I knew this course would teach me about treating animals, but in a large way it has reintroduced key concepts into my human practice.

A brief introduction into animal acupuncture

Animal acupuncture has been around almost as long as human acupuncture, but like human acupuncture it has really only started gaining popularity in the West within the last 30 years. The theory for animal acupuncture and human acupuncture is strikingly similar; this is due to the fact that Qi is Qi and does not vary with the “container.” Of course, there is some adjustment of locations for body shape and walking on four limbs instead of two, but basic morphology is very close to humans, therefore point and channel placement follows suit. There are some non-channel points and systems which were developed by Chinese horsemen for the symptomatic treatment of illness, but the transposition of channels onto animals is more widely used and accepted. Needle technique and point selection varies as much as the many styles and systems which have flowered into the human acupuncture world.

Time tested concepts for all sentient beings

The first concept which has been reinforced time after time by my mentor and again in this animal course is that *Less Is More*. This concept is something that I think every acupuncturist occasionally forgets, either from being over zealous or when getting frustrated with a patient who is not responding to treatment. I became amazed during treating and observing others treat how few needles it would take before an animal's energy would shift or their symptoms would change. There was less concern over needling bilaterally or getting every point that would be great for the patient, and more focus on doing only what needs to be done, nothing more, nothing less. Apply a needle or two and wait and see. I had always tried to be sparing with the needles but since this course, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of needles used in my human clinic. So far I think patients are responding better.

Flexibility was another important lesson accentuated during treating animals. Imagine treating a patient and thinking that needling the Jing-Well points on the Liver and Spleen channels would be perfect for them. Now imagine looking for that first toe and not finding a first digit at all. Cats and dogs are missing that digit and horses have most of their “fingers and toes” fused together. At this point you have two choices refuse to treat or let it go and try something different. Also pets will sometime guard areas of their body or move too much to get to the desired point. Forcing the issue will ruin your treatment as well as possible get you bitten, scratched or kicked. Perhaps if our human patients did these things we would all be milder in our approach. It is best at this point to choose a

different route for treating. The need to change and be flexible when treating animals is not only better for the patient, but also safer for the practitioner. This concept is still very important with humans and a strong emphasis should be placed on keeping the patient comfortable and working with what the patient gives you. Certain patients may be unable to lie down, may be in wheel chair, missing limbs or uncomfortable with us touching a certain area. Our normal flow of treatment needs to have the flexibility to change with the patients needs.

With treating animals a whole new challenge of getting your intake from a third party (the owner) comes into play. The owner might be putting their own take on the animal's symptoms, either by not being observant enough or not understand truly how the animal is feeling. Since there is no other option, except maybe to ask the animal directly and run the risk of being institutionalized, *observation* and *palpation* must be heavily relied upon. Fortunately animals seem to be more open with these types of evaluations. Often in clinic human patients may not be able to give you the answer you are looking for due to various reasons. Perhaps the acupuncturist used an unfamiliar term, or the patient "doesn't know how to put it in words" or is embarrassed about their current condition. Observation and palpation skills are a very critical step in interpreting the patient's responses to your questions. Treating animals which are unable to give you this information definitely makes you re-evaluate your intake and diagnosis method.

It seems that throughout this course the principles of acupuncture and diagnosis did not change with the number of legs of the patient. In fact, working with animals has re-instilled the importance of these key principles for me and my classmates.

Special Thanks

I would like to thank the all the courses teachers at the Tai Sophia Institute in Maryland, especially Noreen Javornik who made the entire course possible and Randi Sobel for being her support system and at times the comic relief. I would also urge anyone who is interested in working with animals and acupuncture to attend this course. I also have special thank you to my mentor, Peter Yates, who has given my constant support and once again steered me in the right direction, by advising to enroll in this course.

Tom Ingegno is a licensed acupuncturist in both New York and Maryland. He has taught several classes at the New York College of Health Professions and the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in New York. He was a Board Member of Edo Kai Traditional Acupuncture Society. His practice consists of Japanese Meridian Therapy, Da Shin Technique, and Sawada Style Moxibustion. In addition he is also certified in Animal Acupuncture.