Feline Rehabilitation

A field poised for dramatic growth

by Lynne Friedmann

In recent years, a young field of veterinary medicine known as rehabilitation has been generating buzz among veterinary professions and the pet-owning public. This specialty, which found its initial application treating horses and dogs, is now poised for tremendous growth meeting the needs of feline patients.

Cats are the number-one household pet in the United States, with an estimated 95.6 million cats found in 45.4 million American households, according to the American Pet Products Association National Pet Owner Survey, covering the years 2013–14.

Common reasons cats need rehab
Cats can greatly benefit from rehabilitation following orthopedic surgery (e.g., for fractures or joint reconstructions) as well as neurologic disorders, such as trauma in the nervous system. But, far and away, the primary reason cats require rehabilitation is some sort of muscular-skeletal condition, such as osteoarthritis (OA). It is a condition more common in cats than one might expect.

In a retrospective study, data suggests that 20 percent of cats of all ages have some level of OA. In another study, Texas A&M researchers found evidence that in cats 10 years of age and older, the prevalence of OA is 90

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percent, with joint involvement visible in radiographs.

"These cats had been brought in and X-rays taken for a variety of reasons. None presented with pain," said Robin Downing, DVM, CCPRP, DAAPM, DACVSMR, hospital director of AAHA-accredited Windsor Veterinary Clinic, PC, and The Downing Center for Animal Pain Management, LLC, in Windsor, Colo.

**History of veterinary rehabilitation**
Just as physical therapy is an integral part of the healing process in human medicine, veterinary rehabilitation does the same for animals. Be aware that most states restrict the term "physical therapy" to licensed physical therapists who work with human patients. Therefore, the term "rehabilitation" applies to veterinary practices.

Interest and training in veterinary rehabilitation started in Europe and the United States in the 1980s, as veterinarians sought better patient management strategies. Steady growth in the field led to the First Symposium for Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation in Veterinary Medicine, which took place, in 1999, at Oregon State University. The first textbook on veterinary rehabilitation was published in the early 2000s.

**Underpinnings in canine rehab**
Because people tend to bring their dogs to the clinic more often than their cats, it is not surprising that the focus of veterinary rehabilitation training, research, and literature began—and remains—on dogs.

"As is often the case with cats, it's 'we'll get there when we get there,'" said Downing.

While there is not yet an official field of feline rehabilitation, there has been a trickle-down effect as practitioners trained in canine rehab took it upon themselves to modify and extend these modalities to meet the needs of cat patients in general and specialized practices.

"We now have a population of veterinary practices dedicated only to cats," said Downing. "It's a terrific change in our professional culture that this is an option."

**Formal and informal rehabilitation training**
A rehabilitation veterinarian is a doctor of veterinary medicine with training, expertise, and experience in the management of pain and loss of function through injury and illness.

Currently, rehabilitation is not part of any veterinary school's core curriculum. Some programs may include an introduction to the concept, offer it as an elective, or make available a couple of weeks of hands-on experience in clinical rotation. Training and certification in rehabilitation, therefore, comes from postgraduate study.

"I was interested in the application of acupuncture to veterinary medicine even before I attended vet school," said Downing. "As a veterinary assistant, I saw the success of rehabilitation [in] patients."

After a few years in practice, Downing realized acupuncture was just one facet of rehabilitation and became certified through training at the University of Tennessee.
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There are two formal training programs in animal rehabilitation in the United States. The University of Tennessee is the only university-based training program. The Canine Rehab Institute, based in Florida, is a freestanding training organization. Both are focused on canine rehabilitation and are designed to meet the needs of veterinarians and veterinary technicians.

"While the certification is in canine rehabilitation, the techniques are certainly applicable to felines," said Carolina Medina, DVM, DACVSMR, CVA, CVCH, of the VCA Sacramento (Calif.) Veterinary Referral Center’s Rehabilitation Department. Medina is a graduate of the Canine Rehab Institute.

Informal education in rehabilitation can come from topic-focused sessions offered at national and international veterinary conferences and seminars. Informal training can come from working alongside a certified rehabilitation veterinarian in a practice.

Signs of greater growth in animal rehabilitation

Today, more than 10 countries have animal physical therapy associations. Among them is the American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians (AARV), formed in 2007 to educate veterinary surgeons, veterinarians, and the public about the role of this specialist. Among resources offered on the AARV website is a list of veterinarians certified in rehabilitation as well as a list of pet insurance companies offering rehabilitation-related coverage.

Another unmistakable sign that animal rehabilitation is poised for greater growth is the number of veterinary conferences presenting continuing education on the topic. This includes an AARV lecture track at the annual North American Veterinary Community conference.

No field advances without evidence-based research, and peer-reviewed papers on rehabilitation in cats are appearing in veterinary journals. In 2014, AARV announced the establishment of a competitive annual awards program to fund additional clinical research related to the field of animal rehabilitation and research in the areas of pain management and/or stem cell therapy for canine and feline patients.

"It is exciting to see more and more attention paid to asking the question: How can we do a better job for what has been an underserved population?” said Downing.

Myths and realities of cat rehab

There are preconceived notions that cats simply won’t tolerate rehab techniques. Nothing can be further from the truth. Does rehab with cat patients take some training? Of course, it does.

"We have to talk to cats differently, train them differently when using these techniques," said Downing. “But they are capable of doing what dogs do in the world of rehab.”

Granted, hydrotherapy is performed less often with cats, but it should not be automatically dismissed as a therapy option.

“They’re not being submerged,” said Medina. “They are being put in water only up to the elbow. Cats can do very well with that.”

Adding rehabilitation to a practice

Some rehabilitation services—such as application of heat or cold, stretching, and medical massage—can be added to a practice without a veterinarian having to undergo the contact hours needed for a credential.

The amount of equipment needed in a practice depends on how extensive are the rehabilitation services offered. Modalities that require little equipment can be readily accommodated in existing clinic space. If a practice decides to offer a full range of services, significant dedicated space must be set aside or built out.
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Other considerations include an adequate water source for hydrotherapy and even the type of flooring. "Floors that grip are important," said Medina.

Beyond equipment and facilities, a practice needs a highly trained support staff that includes credentialed veterinary technicians.

"That is a limitation, acquiring a cadre of trained veterinary technicians," said Downing. "In an ideal world, both a certified rehab vet and a certified technician would work on the same patient."

Client's role in rehabilitation
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Patients gain the most benefit from rehab if once- or twice-a-week clinic visits are combined with at-home therapy routines. But client referral before a condition becomes debilitating," said Medina.

Challenges facing the field
A big challenge in moving feline rehabilitation forward is educating veterinary colleagues unfamiliar with these modalities.

"If there's one message I'd like to get out it's to refer earlier," said Medina. "Rehabilitation is not a last resort."

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**Resources**

- The American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians was formed in 2007 to educate veterinary surgeons, veterinarians, and the public about the role of these specialists in animal health. See [rehabvets.org](http://rehabvets.org).
- The Canine Rehabilitation Institute (with locations in Florida, Maryland, and Colorado) awards the certificate of Canine Rehabilitation Therapist to veterinarians. See [caninerehabinstitute.com](http://caninerehabinstitute.com).
- The University of Tennessee Outreach and Continuing Education Department, in conjunction with Northeast Seminars, offers a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner certificate.