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Acupuncture provides pain relief for pets

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Amy Mayfield, a veterinary technician at Sol Companion, brings her dog Katy in for treatments - but not for the physical therapy offered at the Oakland business. Rather, Katy is a patient of Kirsten Williams, a veterinary acupuncturist from **Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center** in San Ramon who offers acupuncture one day a week at Sol Companion.

Katy was born with hip dysplasia, a malformation of the hip joint, and had surgery on her hips when she was just 1 year old. Now, at age 5, she competes in fly ball - a relay in which teams of dogs jump hurdles, punch a box, catch a tennis ball, and race back over the hurdles.

Williams treats Katy with acupuncture to relieve discomfort left over from the hip dysplasia, build up the dog's stamina, and also ease her fear of sudden movements. She begins every treatment by placing a needle in the top of Katy's head to calm her down.

"I let the dogs wander around the room, but they usually calm down," Williams says. "Some are pretty hyper. Sometimes they're sitting in my lap. It's not an issue, as long as they're lying down and sitting still."

When Williams finishes, Katy relaxes on the office floor and falls asleep.

"This is what she's like after acupuncture," Mayfield says.

As more people find success in non-Western medicine, they take advantage of it for their pets, says Dr. Ann-si Li, a veterinary acupuncturist of 20 years who works at Berkeley Special Veterinary Services, a division of Berkeley Dog and Cat Hospital. She also has a house call practice. "I see a lot of people who say, 'I've done it for myself, I know it works, I want it for my pet,'" Li says. "Then there are the people who are desperate. It's the last straw, they want to try it, but they are skeptical. But when they see it work, they say, 'Oh my goodness.' And then they say, 'I think my husband or wife or friend could really use this,' and they'll often ask me for a referral for a human acupuncturist."

Li charges \$135 for an initial consultation and evaluation, and then \$95 for each acupuncture treatment, with higher prices for house calls. Williams similarly charges \$160 for the evaluation and \$85 for follow-up visits.

For Jeff Hilgert and his wife JoAnne Svendsgaard of Oakland, acupuncture has been a miracle for their black lab Abbey. About four years ago, when the dog was 8 years old, she suffered from severe arthritis in her hips and shoulders.

"She would actually wake up in the middle of the night yelping in pain," Hilgert says. "She'd also fall down occasionally and she'd get very stiff."

As neighbors of Mayfield, the couple decided to take Abbey for acupuncture treatments. She started out with two visits a week for eight weeks, then pared down to a couple times a month. Now, Abbey hasn't needed a treatment in about three months, Hilgert says.

"There was noticeable improvement immediately," says Hilgert, who was cured of his own chronic back pain with acupuncture about 10 years ago. "In a couple of weeks, she just moved more freely and stopped limping and you could tell that the nighttime pain was gone."

Hilgert says that cost is not a factor when he and his wife make decisions regarding health care for their two dogs. Just like most animal owners, they consider their pets part of their family.

"We would spend money on them almost as fast as we would on each other," Hilgert says.

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