

Alternative Pet Therapies

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Chiropractic care can benefit animals as well as humans. **Dr. Karen Gellman** offers holistic veterinary care built around postural therapy.

"The larger you are, as an animal, the less energy you have to put into doing other things as opposed to weight bearing. What you want is to spend the least amount of energy with the things you have to do most." Gellman, who has a PhD in Veterinary Science and training in chiropractic work, explains her focus on biomechanics. Gellman is opening a new holistic veterinary practice, The Wellness Center for Pets in the Claws and Paws shop on Dey Street in Ithaca. Her practice will focus on wellness services for pets, including health-maintaining practices such as chiropractic work.

An animal spends more time every day standing, or lying down, than anything else. Horses stand 22 to 23 hours a day, only needing to lay down for REM sleep. Most dogs exercise outdoors for less than thirty minutes a day.

Therefore, the resting postures domestic animals use generally have a greater affect on their wellness than their exercise activities, says Gellman.

To find out what Gellman offers, we've brought along Sadie, an eight year old black setter. Healthy, bright, and energetic, Sadie pokes around the empty shop while Gellman explains the foci of her practice. In vet school, she became interested in the science of biomechanics. "I did my dissertation on the horse's neck," she says. Horses and dogs have proprioreceptive nerves in their upper necks, feet, and teeth: "These tell you where you are in space; you receive continuous feedback from nerves who tell you your position."

Like a person who habitually stands with his or her knees locked and thereby ends up with lower back strain, animals adopt postures that put strain on the rest of their bodies. Animals who have difficulty standing square can have pain, or structural difficulties, that lead to chronic illness.

Sadie meanders over to Gellman, who gently makes friends with her and massages her neck. Three years ago, Sadie's rear left leg was broken; she shows no signs of the injury in her leg, but she gets in and out of the car with difficulty and sometimes yelps when people touch her head wrong.

"Your dog has a stiff neck," Gellman observes. Chiropractic schools teach that the body responds to pain by tightening up; in Sadie's case, the stiffness in her neck may be a leftover effect of the healed broken leg. Working gently and slowly, Gellman relaxes Sadie's neck, then with the swift sureness of a good chiropractor, makes an adjustment. As she goes on explaining her veterinary practice, she continues to work with Sadie, who breaks to get up and walk around, or shake. After twenty minutes of Gellman's hands-on treatment, Sadie can turn her neck fully to both left and right sides- something she hasn't been able to do since her injury.

"The trappings of the modern world are very bad for their bodies," says Gellman, citing too much time indoors on soft surfaces. Another thing that undermines an animal's posture, and therefore its health, is claws grown too long. "Toenails should not be contacting the ground on a level surface," says Gellman. "Their postural system thinks they're on a hill, and they throw their weight toward the rear." She demonstrates how to clip Sadie's toenails, which it turns out are too long.

Another area of Gellman's focus is the teeth. "In dogs you have a limited (developmental) window to work with dentition." For this, she asks me to stand up in a relaxed upright position. Applying pressure to my back as if to knock me over, she asks me to thrust my jaw forward. "Feel that? Now pull it in," she instructs. With the jaw movement I find my ability to balance also shifts. Working with this knowledge, Gellman can sometimes help dogs with chronic difficulties by getting work done on their teeth.

With her nails clipped and her neck freed, Sadie seems pretty happy, but then, she usually does. The moment of truth comes when we leave, and Sadie leaps effortlessly into the car's back seat. For the first time in three years. Cool.