

Veterinary Medicine and the Concept of Holism

The word holistic has become familiar in our language, but carries with it a myriad of perceptions, and echoes of years of debate and argument regarding the validity of the alternative or complementary therapeutic modalities. At present there is an 'us and them' division in veterinary medicine between the so-called conventional veterinary surgeons and those who choose to use complementary therapies. Holism is frequently used as a dustbin term that denotes a wholly unscientific, unproven, and in some people's eyes, totally unethical approach to medicine. There is an assumption by many that a veterinary surgeon who uses complementary therapies and a holistic approach, has obliterated the years of training that they received at veterinary school, and suddenly their qualifications in turn become downgraded. A person previously thought of as an intellectual or at least a colleague, is often transformed in the minds of some purely conventional veterinary surgeons, into a lost cause of emotions, gullibility, and someone unable to cope with the rigors of modern veterinary practice. This judgement has been exacerbated by the rapid increase in the numbers of lay people who are advertising themselves as complementary practitioners, and who are publishing information to the public via multiple media channels. The level of knowledge across the modalities in the lay sector varies enormously, and is largely unregulated. Despite the law putting animal health firmly in the hands of qualified veterinary surgeons, the pet owning public is using these people to get what they consider to be the medicine of choice. The results are of course as variable as the standards of the practitioners.

It should be the aim of each and every veterinary surgeon in the world to be holistic in his or her approach. Before I define the term holistic however, we need first to revisit and define the current accepted role of the practising veterinary surgeon. We live in a world where definitions are paramount; the label is the quest. The individual animal's life is blurred and often forgotten in our definitions, just as our true obligations as veterinary surgeons can be.

One of the promises that each veterinary surgeon in the United Kingdom makes is '...my constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of animals committed to my care.' In the eyes of many people this promise has become synonymous with blindly following doctrine. The good veterinary surgeon of today is rightly committed to continuing education. Doing the job well requires that the veterinary surgeon must keep abreast of the latest accepted protocol. The highest calling of many veterinary surgeons is to reduce each case down to a single defined diagnosis and impart and use the knowledge from the latest 'state of the art' published paper written on this diagnosis to the client. In so doing they have fulfilled their obligation to the client and the animal. This is seen as an endeavour to ensure the welfare of an animal. The veterinary surgeon sleeps well at night knowing that they are safe from litigation, they have done their best – they made a diagnosis, gave a prognosis, and acted in the best interests of the animal. The expectation for the outcome of a case is largely predicted by past experience and by published outcomes. If for example a grave prognosis is given, euthanasia may well be the 'treatment of choice' offered. For those who like definition, this is the reductionist method of practising medicine. Someone else somewhere within the system will be doing more research, so that next time the veterinary surgeon makes this diagnosis, they will be vigilant and quote from the latest 'state of the art' paper. It is the 'someone else' who must face the complexities of the disease process and reduce it down into clear useable units. The hardest job for the practising veterinary surgeon is keeping abreast of the new information from the research sector. Doctrine is a state of shifting sand, and now with the public having access to more information than ever before, you cannot afford to fall behind, as they may well know what rules you should be following. Clients want diseases defined; forms want diseases defined; colleagues want disease defined. We invent syndromes to cover the more hazily understood disease states or tack on words such as auto-immune or iatrogenic.

This system is relatively clean and safe and allows for the easy control of a large body of people using a title, i.e., that of veterinary surgeon. You can be at fault and disciplined if you do not make an accurate diagnosis (following the accepted diagnostic protocols of the time), or if you do not follow the accepted treatment protocol of the time. Equally you will be protected if you do make an accurate accepted diagnosis, and do follow the accepted treatment protocol of the time.

The responsibility to strive for new understanding is not with the individual veterinary surgeon. The requirement is to be able to match a set of signs and test results from an animal with a published identical set on a page. The desire to look outside the bounds of the current doctrine is positively discouraged. The need to genuinely care about an individual animal and the situation that the animal and owner have arrived at, is not actually a requirement for the veterinary surgeon. It is such a great sadness to me that all of the things which are not actually required from a practising veterinary surgeon, are the very fundamental beliefs I held from the age of twelve when I decided on my career. They are also the beliefs that I spend too much time and effort defending now.

For many people the quest for alternative therapies is born out of frustration and dissatisfaction. To label a disease but be no further on in curing it is a powerful source of frustration and questioning. Long term chronic ill health, in particular the prevalence of diseases such as arthritis, atopy, colitis, which are never cured but held at 'acceptable' levels only with long term drug therapy, is another trigger for questioning the validity of our understanding of the disease processes. Long term medication is a failure not a cure. Then there is the evaluation of the quality of life for those animals that are on long term medication. Certainly for many the choice between the disease effects and the medication side effects comes out on the side of the medication, but sometimes the line is very fine. Despite all of the frustrations though, many continue working within the limitations of the current system, without questioning. For others it is the beginning of the search. It is the beginning of opening the mind to accepting that there may be other ways to see a problem, and to solve it.

Once you start to reach out into the world of holism, the safety nets start to disappear, because quite simply, nothing can be reduced to a single tight diagnosis. How then do we define this word – holism or holistic? One of the simplest definitions of holism is that it is 'a synergistic approach which deals with the combined physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of (human) health and illness.'¹. Holism does not divorce the disease from the animal, but recognises the unified whole. There is a growing acceptance that mental state affects physical health and yet it is often ignored in conventional treatment. The holistic approach encompasses this belief and goes further. Collins English Dictionary also defines holism as 'any doctrine that a system may have properties over and above those of its parts and their organisation'. Holism extends therefore beyond the boundaries of the structural and chemical components of the physical body, and acknowledges that there is an energetic component. Many of the complementary medicines are essentially energetic or vibrational. The shift from the Newtonian mechanistic paradigm which has formed the bedrock of teaching and understanding for all veterinary surgeons to a more Einsteinian view of matter being energy, is for most people both gradual and continually evolving. If we were able to question all so-called holistic veterinary surgeons about their understanding and way of thinking at a moment in time, there would be a tremendous diversity of views. It is the very fact that all of us as qualified veterinary surgeons have started with the same conventional scientific background and approach that makes the mind shift into the understanding of alternative medicines and the energy dimensions of living matter, necessarily slow and full of questioning.

The choice of alternative approaches can seem daunting with some modalities being as extensive in their own right as western conventional medicine. Most of us with scientific minds quite rightly want validity. For some this is the beginning and the end of their

exploration into some of the modalities, as the absence of multiple double blind trials puts up the brick wall. The need also to know exactly how and why something works using our current understanding and evaluation methods will knock out the next layer of enquirers. It is easier to start with a modality, which has a point of reference with our current understanding, such as herbalism or acupuncture.

Acupuncture is a good example of a complementary modality, which is accepted superficially by many veterinary surgeons largely because the science of neuro-physiology is providing us with acceptable theories as to how it might work. Although no single theory explains fully the effects of acupuncture, most theories form extensions in our understanding of chemical neurotransmitters, and autonomic nervous system function. It is less relevant to most to consider the history of the method which has its origins in the East during the Stone Age (3000 years BC), and the subsequent refinement and development of the system in countries and cultures throughout the world. Many are satisfied to harvest only the Western tendency to use set point combinations for identified conditions, which sits comfortably as an adjunct to conventional medicine, but again avoids embracing the concept of holism. For those who take their studies of acupuncture further, the world of traditional Chinese medicine is opened up to them. Acupuncture is just one part of the TCM system, which is a philosophy, with a well-defined set of laws governing the universe and everything within it. Energy and energy imbalance are fundamental to this system. Diagnosis and treatment is aimed at recognising and correcting imbalances in the bodies life energy or Qi. Alongside the concept of Qi is that of Yin-Yang, which represent interdependent opposites in a state of flux and change. Western acupuncture can be learnt relatively easily and quickly, will be looked at as a complementary therapy, but is not a holistic modality. It is eastern acupuncture and philosophy, which can be termed holistic. To learn it means a commitment to hours of study, and a foray into the world of symbolism, which is difficult for the scientific mind, but the reward is a different way to look at disease and treatment beyond the physical/chemical reductionist one. It is also a system which has had reproducible results over thousands of years.

A second major holistic modality, which has a rapidly growing place in veterinary medicine, and provides another way of looking at disease, is Homoeopathy. Unlike acupuncture there is no comfortable version which can be tacked on to conventional medicine, despite the attempts to do so by commercial companies who have introduced ranges of so-called 'First Aid' remedies into veterinary surgeries, chemists and health food shops. Homoeopathy is not about diluted and dynamised substances, although ironically this is the major source of dissent among the ill informed. Homoeopathy is a completely different way of viewing health and disease, and again acknowledges the dynamic energetic nature of a living being, beyond its physical and chemical realm. This energy was originally described by the physician Samuel Hahnemann as the *Vital Force*. With Homoeopathy the veterinary surgeon has to completely reinterpret what he is seeing in terms of the body's symptoms, and change his response to them. Fundamental laws of Homoeopathy accept that the body has the ability to heal itself, and that symptoms are adaptive responses of the body, and not the disease itself. Treatment of imbalance or dis-ease using homoeopathic principles involves enhancing the body's defences and using substances according to the *Principle of Similars*. In simple terms, a substance, which produces a set of symptoms when given to a healthy individual, is used in small doses to cure a sick individual showing the same set of symptoms. In total opposition to the basis of antipathic conventional medicine that is aimed at suppressing the body's symptoms, Homoeopathy attempts to augment them. The symptoms of the individual are taken on all levels including mental, physical, behavioural, and form a pattern which is not labelled as a disease, but is used as the means to provide a match with a therapeutic substance.

The veterinary surgeon that studies and uses this modality has many initial dilemmas. So many syndromes are currently treated with suppressive treatments such as steroid and antibiotic, which directly conflict with the homoeopathic principle. Many animals present after years of suppressive therapy and may not be suitable candidates for attempts at trying to

unravel the complexities of their cumulative health state. The very fact that Homoeopathy can augment symptoms suggests that the animal may indeed worsen before it can 'heal' with Homoeopathy, and thus may be too great a burden for a chronically sick animal that has been chronically suppressed. But this is not the only dilemma, as scientific evidence and explanation for the mechanism of action of homoeopathic remedies is effectively in its infancy. Repeated calls for extensive statistically significant double blind trials for the use of certain remedies in certain conditions, immediately contravenes fundamental understanding in Homoeopathy, i.e. that there is no named condition, but only individual responses to an insult. Thus for every different individual response pattern, there will be a different remedy choice. To use homoeopathic remedies in any other way is neither holistic nor homoeopathic. There is of course potential for such research in cloned animal populations which in theory should when given the same conditions, produce the same response patterns. This however, raises ethical questions, particularly for people who see all living things as more than a collection of chemicals. Finally, there is of course the issue of high dilutions, and the remedies themselves. There is at present no single simple explanation within our current understanding as to the mechanism of action of homoeopathic medicine. However, within the different specialities throughout the world of physics, research results are being produced which are beginning to piece it together. It does not take many months of reading current issues of *Nature* and *New Scientist*, to realise that the laws of physics are being rewritten constantly, and judgements must not be made using obsolete laws and inappropriate constants such as the much overused Avagadro's Number. We are left at the present time with much that is unexplained. This should however, not be the basis for invalidating the enormous volume of material which reports the observations and results based upon using this system of medicine.

Traditional Chinese medicine and Homoeopathy are examples of two entirely different systems of medicine, which are in themselves holistic. There are other modalities that can be used to access the energy dimension of the living animal such as Bach Flower Remedies, Radionics, Crystal Therapy. Other modalities can complement each other to give the veterinary surgeon a greater diagnostic and therapeutic armoury for the physical/chemical dimensions of the animal. These modalities would include Herbal Medicine, Chiropractic, Massage Therapy, Magnetic Field Therapy, Low Level Laser Therapy, Nutraceuticals, Aromatherapy. The principles and practice of each of the modalities should be studied before they are used. Many of the problems that arise from the use of complementary therapies can be traced back to a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of the person using the therapy. To learn and understand all of the currently available complementary therapies requires an enormous investment from the veterinary surgeon in time and in money. But if they are to be used correctly and safely they must be used with knowledge and understanding to a level akin to that of our conventional veterinary medicine. The structure and depth of the teaching courses available in the UK for Homoeopathy and acupuncture surprise many veterinary surgeons that have no idea of the enormity of the subjects. Such commitment of resources is very difficult for someone who is starting out, not knowing if they are going to be enlightened or merely deepened in their degree of scepticism.

For those who do want to consider a holistic approach to veterinary medicine, it is far better during the time of transition from purely conventional western medicine, to enlist people trained in whatever modality that is thought appropriate, to work with you. As veterinary surgeons we are used to working alone, and often fear criticism and judgement from colleagues. To recognise the need for something beyond the bounds of an individual's knowledge should not be seen as failure. Indeed most conventional veterinary surgeons recognise the cases that should be referred to specialist conventional veterinary surgeons. To recognise that a different approach or a further dimension should be considered, can seem much harder to many.

Lack of knowledge is not an excuse to do nothing. An inability to come to terms with the philosophy of a modality is also not enough of a reason to stop wanting to push out beyond

the limitations of western conventional medicine. Equally, embracing the whole concept of holism and complementary therapies does not give cause to comprehensively reject everything that conventional medicine has taught us. Anatomy, Physiology, Surgery, conventional therapeutics for example, all have a place and a part to play. Holism is about open minds and thinking minds. As veterinary surgeons we have a duty of care, we are by law in the UK the only people who can take responsibility for the health of other peoples animals. It is the veterinary profession therefore that should be providing animal owners with veterinary surgeons trained and qualified in all the modalities. We must aim for an integrated system, and not an 'us and them' system. Once we recognise that a living being is more than simply the sum of its parts, and is an energy system, we cannot look only to conventional reductionist veterinary diagnostics or therapeutics. A comprehensive holistic approach has to be the way forward.

References

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