

Chiropractors help relieve aging pets' aches and pains

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By Lauren K. Meade, Globe Correspondent | September 8, 2005

Leigh Minicucci swears by her chiropractor to treat her scoliosis. But the Saturday morning appointment she was keeping at Commonwealth Chiropractic in Needham wasn't for her.

In the office parking lot off Highland Avenue, Minicucci delicately eased her black Lab, Rambler, out of the back seat of her Honda Accord, the license plate on which reads RAMMIE.

The Randolph resident has seen a chiropractor for five years. It made sense when her chiropractor suggested that surgery-free therapy could also help relieve her dog's severe arthritis. For three years, Rambler has received the treatment once a month.

Minicucci and Rambler are part of a growing patient base for Tamara Truchon, a certified animal chiropractor who has been treating dogs and horses for two years. In addition to seeing about 150 human patients weekly, Truchon, 33, treats about 10 animals, either making house calls or at the office, she said. She received her license to treat humans in December 1998.

Truchon is one of only about 530 actively certified animal chiropractors worldwide, according to Leslie Means, executive director of the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association. Means said licensed animal chiropractors are required to fulfill 220 classroom and laboratory hours in one of three approved schools. Truchon attended one of them, the Parker College of Chiropractic in Dallas.

Animal chiropractic has been a popular treatment for performance animals such as racing dogs and dressage horses since the mid-1980s. As alternative medical therapies are becoming increasingly popular for humans, adherents are seeking their favorite treatments for their canine and feline companions.

Such was Jose Cro Granito's experience. The Stoneham resident gets his neck and back adjusted every three weeks by Truchon. He decided in February to bring his American Eskimo dog Andy in for treatment. Andy has severe arthritis and the autoimmune disease lupus, Cro Granito said. The veterinarian prescribed anti-inflammatory drugs. But one month later, Cro Granito still had to carry Andy up the stairs.

Nearly seven months after beginning the chiropractic regime, Andy can go up and down the stairs, jump on the bed, and stand on his hind legs when he gets excited. Cro Granito said he will spare no expense for Andy, which is why he is willing to pay \$40 per visit every month.

Walpole resident Janice Connors and her beagle, Susie, waited in the reception area on a recent Saturday for their appointment with Truchon. Connors said after two of her beagles suffered hip dysplasia, a hereditary disease that can cause arthritis and is treated with surgery, she wasn't taking any chances with the third.

Connors researched preventive measures, learning about animal chiropractors at a wellness seminar hosted this summer by an Especially for Pets store.

Initially, she was dubious.

"Being a skeptic, you always hear people make comments," she said. "I think they call them 'bone crackers.' "

Before Connors brought her beagle in for a visit with Truchon, she first wanted to test the waters.

"I figure if [Susie] is gonna go, I should try it," Connors said. She schedules surgeries at Sturdy Memorial Hospital in Attleboro, and said she developed a "nagging ache" in her lower back from sitting behind a desk every day.

Connors said she was impressed with Truchon's professionalism and scheduled an appointment for Susie.

Truchon entered the waiting room.

"OK, Sunshine," she said to Susie. "How's her walking?" she asked Connors. It was Susie's second visit.

"Well, in the morning we do the block," Connors said. The loop around her neighborhood takes about a half-hour, and

Susie often limps during the mild workout.

Truchon led the dog by leash inside the office, an airy workspace divided into chiropractic stations and play areas for children.

Truchon unleashed Susie with a quick motion and began pressing her palms and fingers along the beagle's spine, eventually concentrating on the hips.

"There are little spasms where she's tight," said Truchon.

Truchon palpated her hips, thighs, and loins, pointing out that dogs can develop an uneven stride if their hip joints don't move properly. The chiropractor adjusted Susie's joints with a metal activator, a device that looks like a palm-sized pogo stick and sounds like a stapler when used. Activators deliver a thrust 200 times faster than the human hand, Truchon explained.

Truchon ended with a gentle tail-pull, which she said stretches the muscles along the spine. The session lasted less than 15 minutes, after which Susie stood up stiffly, slinking away from the group huddled around her. Seconds later, the stiffness subsided in her gate. Susie roamed across the office, sniffing toys and chairs in the play station.

Later that day, Connors took the spunky beagle for an hour-long walk through a wooded path outside the neighborhood and saw no limping, she said in a phone interview afterward.

Dogs typically are complacent patients, said Truchon, with the exception of one Doberman who "nips" and wears a muzzle during treatment. Treating horses is a full-body workout. The job requires climbing up and down a plastic stool -- hay bales are dangerous -- and adjusting their joints with all of her weight, she said. And the job hazards are potentially deadly. Adjusting a horse's rear joints, for example, is something she said she would never do.

Though many veterinarians are open to referring pets to chiropractors -- some animal hospitals even include in-house chiropractors -- doctors caution pet owners to do their homework and speak with a veterinarian before seeking the treatment.

Edward Leonard, a veterinarian at Slade Veterinary Hospital in Framingham, said he often refers animals suffering from muscle and skeletal conditions to chiropractors. But he warned that animals with internal medical conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease, or spinal nerve core damage should not undergo chiropractic treatment. Older animals, Leonard said, should also not be "overtreated," as their skeletal systems are fragile.

Craig Smith, an American Veterinary Medical Association staff consultant and Illinois-based veterinarian, worked on a committee with other association members in 2001 to establish guidelines for animal chiropractics and other alternative veterinary medicine such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and aromatherapy.

Smith said that while the association does not officially recognize any alternative specialty, it advises veterinarians to recommend whatever treatment is in the best interest of the animal.

Owners shopping around for chiropractors should research their training and certifications, Smith said, noting that in many states, chiropractors who normally only treat humans risk losing their licenses if caught practicing on animals.

He stressed that pets undergoing chiropractic treatment should continue to see their vets.

"Veterinarians will look at a broad range of treatments," Smith said. "Chiropractors may only look at chiropractic options."

Minicucci has taken that approach with Rambler. With the chiropractor's help, she was able to postpone putting the dog on arthritis medications, which she feared would harm his internal organs. But now, at 14, he has to take it.

In the Commonwealth Chiropractic parking lot, Truchon palpated Rambler's hips. The Labrador's arthritis is so severe, he can't descend the steps to the basement-level office.

Still, Minicucci said, the treatment allows him to stay active in ways that otherwise would be impossible. Rambler can now climb into her Honda, jump on the couch, and climb the four stairs leading into her house, she said.

"People think I'm crazy for taking my dog to a chiropractor," Minicucci said later. "I always joke that some people are pet owners. I'm a pet parent." ■