

Some Thoughts on Holistic or Alternative Veterinary Medicine

Part 1

By Richard J. Holliday, DVM

It is a difficult task to briefly describe "holistic" or "alternative" veterinary medicine. The dictionary defines "holistic" as being concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with parts or divisions, while "alternative" describes something existing or functioning outside the established cultural, social, or economic system. Both definitions are correct but do not adequately address the wide variations within the realm of holistic veterinary medicine as practiced today.

The range of alternative therapies is immense...acupuncture, herbs, homeopathy, refined colostrum products, microbial products (lactobacilli and yeasts), mega-vitamins, radionics, and many other natural products and procedures. The list goes on and on and I apologize if I've left out someone's favorite therapy. Most are useful and generally effective alternatives to the drugs, hormones and antibiotics commonly used in veterinary medicine today.

A HOLISTIC PRACTITIONER

I believe that the distinguishing characteristic of holistic practitioners is the way they approach problems...in short, the way they think. A true holistic practitioner not only looks at the patient as an integrated unit but also views it in the context of the whole ecosystem in which it lives. In this regard, a sick animal is not only a patient to be treated but is also a symptom of a sick farm. Both patients need help. Any remedial action must include what is necessary for the immediate relief of the patient as well as a critical assessment of the long-term effects of the chosen therapy on the patient and the environment. Part of the treatment must also be the removal or reduction of predisposing factors.

A holistic practitioner should also be well versed in several treatment modalities and be able to pick the most appropriate ones needed in any situation.

Finally, a true holistic practitioner should emphasize holistic animal health management (proactive) rather than any kind of treatment (reactive), whether it be holistic or conventional.

It should be noted that the terms holistic and alternative are not interchangeable. For example: an acupuncturist may be practicing alternative medicine, but if he only treats symptoms and does not search for the cause or other useful therapies he is probably not a holistic practitioner ... a fine distinction perhaps, but a significant one.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

To me, the greatest advantage to the holistic approach is that it works! In the hands of an experienced practitioner most holistic/alternative treatments have as good or a better success rate than conventional therapy. I think this is true because holistic practitioners attempt to find and treat the cause not just the symptoms.

There are many other advantages to holistic medicine ... less pollution, fewer side effects, and especially the fact that holistic medicine follows the old medical axiom, "at least do no harm." This advice seems to have been lost or overlooked in the U.S. as evidenced by the recent report that pharmaceutical drugs are now either the 4th or 6th leading cause of death.

Unfortunately, several factors have slowed public acceptance. The sale and use of natural products do not generate the huge profits necessary to buy researchers, lobbyists, and politicians as does the sale of antibiotics, pharmaceuticals, herbicides and insecticides. Thus we have little credibility in some circles because we do not have research to back up our empirical observations.

Because so few schools teach these advanced concepts, there are not enough qualified practitioners, although the number is growing. Those that do engage in holistic practice are often subjected to harassment by government agencies.

The biggest disadvantage is that most people tend to use it for the wrong reasons and at the wrong time! They will turn to alternative treatments only as a last resort when everything conventional medicine has to offer has failed. Usually by this time the patient is in advanced stages of the disease and also suffering from the side effect of all the prescribed drugs they have used. When the alternative approach also fails, and it usually does in this situation, the patient gives up on the entire concept and never realizes that the alternative treatment might have worked had they used the right product or technique at the right time. Unfortunately, this apparent "failure" provides more evidence for the pharmaceutical /medical complex to ridicule and condemn the entire concept of holistic medicine.

THE FOCUS OF HOLISTIC ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

The success of the holistic approach requires a change in perspective and the development of a holistic outlook towards livestock management and disease control. It is not as simple as merely substituting a "natural" alternate therapy for a "toxic" drug. The principles behind the success of holistic therapy go much deeper than the characteristics or source of the medication.

Conventional Veterinary Medicine is primarily concerned with the treatment of sick animals. Even if successful, the loss of life and production added to the cost of treatment makes this approach by far the most expensive.

Veterinarians also emphasize disease prevention. Herd health checks and vaccination programs fall into this category. As essential as these procedures are, the outlook is still towards preventing disease. Vaccinations may increase resistance against a specific organism but lowers the animal's general vitality to other challenges. Typical of this category are herds or flocks where the animals are not really sick or showing symptoms but are not really well and productive either.

A third concept, usually neglected by conventional veterinary practitioners, is that of health enhancement through holistic management. Everything possible is done to raise health and vitality to the highest level possible. All management practices are evaluated on the basis of their effects on the vitality of each animal in the herd. Strict attention is given to providing superlative nutrition. In so far as possible, all environmental stress factors are eliminated. Water is checked for nitrates or other toxins. Housing and ventilation are maintained at optimum levels. Any equipment with which the animals come in contact is properly maintained and adjusted. There are literally hundreds of other environmental factors that impact animal health and they all must be considered. When animals are maintained at a high level of vitality their resistance is much higher. Health enhancement is much more profitable than either treatment or prevention.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments or criticisms at rjhdvm@rconnect.com or rjhdvm@aol.com.

Dr. Richard Holliday has worked for IMPRO for the past 18 years as the Technical Services Veterinarian. Prior to that, he had a private mixed practice in northwest Missouri for 25 years. He became certified as a Veterinary Acupuncturist in 1988 and has been actively promoting organic agriculture and holistic veterinary medicine for over 30 years.

Dr. Holliday will be in ME, VT, and NY in January 2004 for healthcare workshops. [See calendar for details.](#)