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Dr. Donna McWilliams expands
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Chinese veterinary medicine



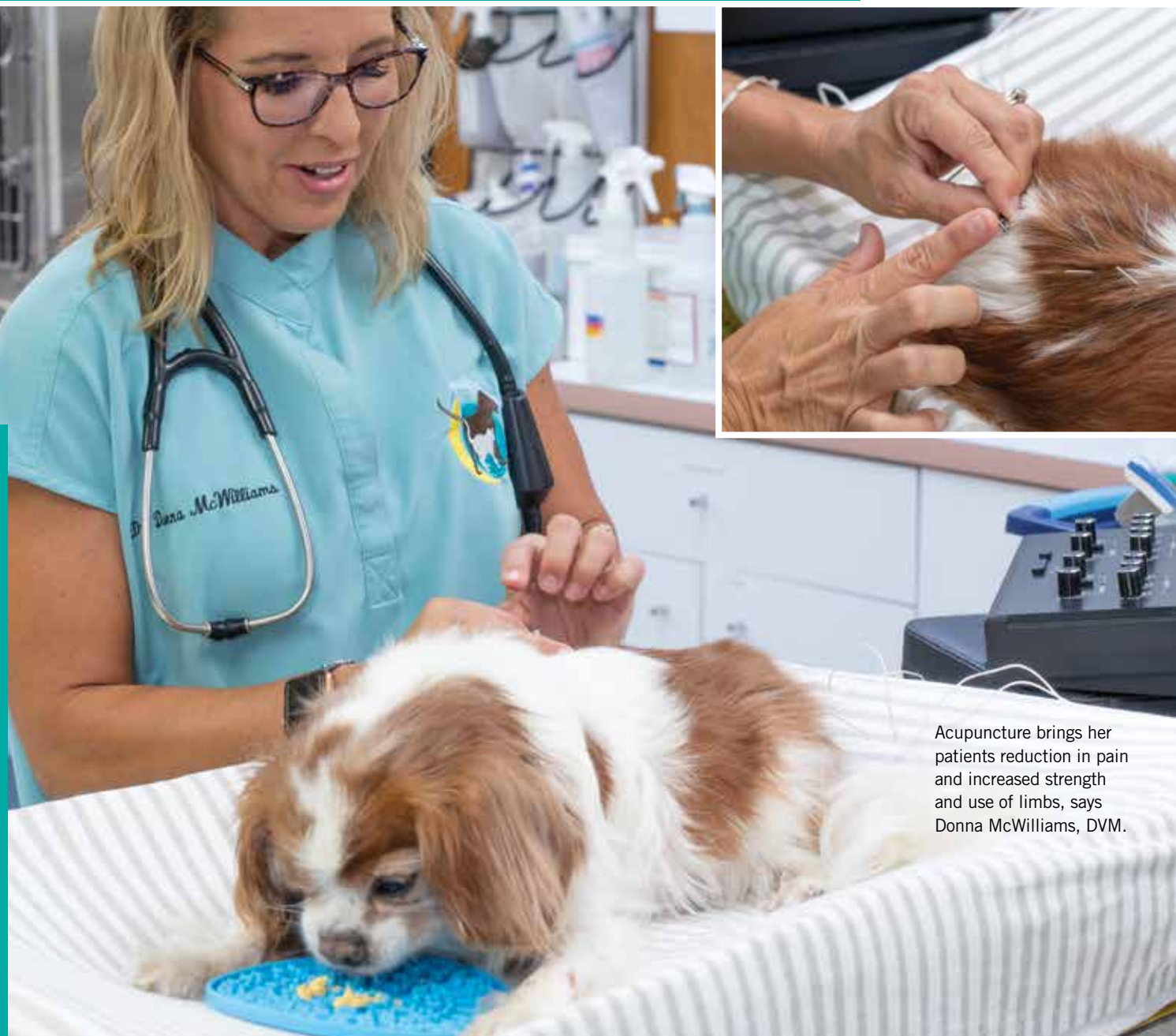
INTEGRATING EAST AND WEST

At My Pet's Animal Hospital, Dr. Donna McWilliams uses traditional Chinese medicine to expand her options for helping patients.

AT A GLANCE: MY PET'S ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Lakeland, Fla.

- **DOCTORS:** 4 full time, plus a contracted internal specialist
- **STAFF:** 25
- **EXAM ROOMS:** 4
- **SIZE:** 5,100 sq. ft.
- **KEY PROFIT CENTERS:** prescriptions (includes Chinese herbal medicines), dentistry, wellness plans, internal medicine, boarding/grooming
- **FUTURE PLANS:** a new addition that will increase the practice size to 9,000 sq. ft. and 9 exam rooms; expand surgical services



Acupuncture brings her patients reduction in pain and increased strength and use of limbs, says Donna McWilliams, DVM.

In every cover story, The Team profiles a different PSIVet practice to showcase the many ways that members are meeting and exceeding their goals, while doing business on their own terms.

By Beth Pollock Bruch

Pumpkin's owners were heartbroken. Their lively little Dachshund, only 4 years old, had suddenly become paralyzed with a herniated disc. They couldn't afford surgery, so they sadly brought her in to My Pet's Animal Hospital in Lakeland, Fla., for euthanasia.

But Donna McWilliams, DVM, wasn't ready to give up on Pumpkin. Having recently studied Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM) at the Chi Institute in Reddick, Fla., she offered to try acupuncture and Chinese herbs. The owners eagerly accepted.

McWilliams gave Pumpkin electro-acupuncture, an herbal blend called "Body Sore" for muscular soreness and inflammation, and Gabapentin for nerve pain. Pumpkin showed improvement by the second session, and in 10 days, she was walking again. The overjoyed owners became loyal clients.

TWO BASKETS

"I got into Chinese medicine because I got really tired of saying to clients, 'There's nothing else I can do for you,'" says McWilliams. "Now I always have this other option to offer. It's not expensive, it doesn't hurt anything, and I've seen it open the minds of our other doctors and staff."

She is the only doctor at the practice certified in acupuncture, but the other doctors also have started using Chinese herbal medicines. "They've seen it work," she says.

McWilliams calls this approach to veterinary medicine "integrative" rather than ▶



Practice Manager Shannon Ussery took the initiative to post signs in back to encourage an atmosphere of positivity, helpfulness and gratitude.

Integrating East and West

“alternative,” because it draws from both Western and Eastern traditions. “I love it, it’s having 2 giant baskets to pick from,” she says. “We usually do a combination.”

The integrative approach has transformed her practice, with many of her patients now using Chinese herbals as part of their treatments. “That percentage has gotten very big,” she says. “Easily 1 in 4 of my patients are sent home with an herb.”

PROFITABLE MIX

McWilliams is certified in both acupuncture and canine rehabilitation, and the practice’s other doctors bring their own special interests to the mix. For instance, Sara Davis, DVM, enjoys pocket pets, dentistry and behavior, while Price Dickson, DVM, has a long-standing interest in exotics and is looking forward to becoming

SAMPLE PRICING

At My Pet’s Animal Hospital, acupuncture’s low ongoing costs make it a profitable niche.

- 30-minute acupuncture session: \$68
- 45-60 minute new-patient initial acupuncture consult: \$95
- Cost per session for acupuncture needles: \$1.50

certified in TCVM.

From acupuncture to exotics, each ancillary service creates its own draw, McWilliams adds. “They all bring people to the practice,” she says.

And the practice is thriving. McWilliams is the sole owner of My Pet’s Animal Hospital with her husband Kevin McWilliams, a financial advisor, acting as CFO. Since 2007 when she bought the practice, they have grown it from 1 to 4 doctors and doubled gross revenue to more than \$2.2 million, with EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) at a high-performing 20%. McWilliams also co-owns Sarasota Animal Hospital with a colleague who runs the practice while she has a hands-off advisory role and Kevin performs similar CFO duties.

McWilliams’ business success, management prowess and commitment to her community have won her several local business awards, and she and her husband



Left: Anxious dogs in the kennel receive Shen Calmer during their stay.
Right: Client Advocate Amanda Downey gives a cat Churu, a product that helps stimulate appetite during hospitalization and post-op.

were founding members of PSlvet’s Strategic Growth Alliance (SGA) business study group program.

NEW HORIZONS

McWilliams’ path to integrative medicine started with having her ACL repaired. Her subsequent physical therapy led to an interest in canine rehabilitation, then TCVM, which she discovered was backed by solid research. “There are a lot of good peer-reviewed articles and studies now about the fact that it works,” she says.

In 2012, she began studying at the Chi Institute. Over the next 2 years, she combined online learning with stints at the institute to work on patients, and began offering free TCVM to her own patients to practice the techniques.

For cats with kidney failure, she injected vitamin B12 into various acupuncture points to stimulate blood flow to their kidneys. She used acupuncture and herbs for dogs with kidney failure, and found she could extend their lives comfortably for a year. She minimized the effects of chemotherapy with acupuncture and an immune-boosting herb called “Wei Qi Booster.” She gave blocked cats an herb called “Crystal Stone” in addition to their urinary diets (or alone if clients couldn’t afford the diets) and observed urinary crystals clear and small stones break down.

After becoming certified, McWilliams began charging for her services, and TCVM now accounts for a small but growing stream of revenue. “From a gross revenue standpoint, it’s not a huge player, but the profitability is there, because there’s very little specialty equipment needed once you have the education,” says McWilliams. She estimates that she made back the cost of her training in under 2 years.



Above: The practice uses many Chinese herbals affiliated with the Chi Institute where Dr. McWilliams trained.

Right: Price Dickson, DVM, administers an herbal in a liquid preparation to one of her avian patients.



“For Chinese herbals, cost of goods is 30%, so there’s a good markup, but they’re still affordable for clients,” she adds. Revenue from the herbs is folded into the practice’s pharmacy revenue, which is at 23% of gross, well above the industry benchmark of 15%.

There’s also an overflow effect

that is hard to calculate, since TCVM can extend patients’ lives and also brings more clients to the practice. “I get a lot of referrals for acupuncture and alternative medicine, and many people who come in for acupuncture become full clients and bring in other pets as well,” she says.

HERBAL TOOLS

But for McWilliams, the key benefit Chinese herbs offer is allowing her to practice better medicine. Some are so inexpensive and effective that McWilliams simply uses them behind the scenes without charging for their use.

For example, she keeps a tub of “Shen Calmer” in the kennel and has ▶

MINDFUL MEDICINE AND MANAGEMENT

When practicing acupuncture, mindfulness is key, McWilliams has learned. “The pets pick up the energy you put off,” she says. “You have to take deep breaths and get your head straight. It’s like you can’t heal somebody else unless you’re in a good spot yourself.”

She carries that philosophy over to her management style, focusing on good communication, gratitude and supporting her team. “So much of what we do is grief counseling, delivering bad news, talking about people’s fears for their pets,” she says. “My team is not going to do their best if they’re stressed out, tired or haven’t had a break or lunch. We are busy and intense, but we don’t want a toxic work environment.”

Doctors are awarded bonuses based on how the hospital does as a whole, not on their individual

production, and McWilliams frequently buys the team lunch; organizes staff outings, chair massages and theme days; distributes gift cards every Thanksgiving; and gave “hero” bonuses during COVID-19.

Staff turnover is very low. “We are blessed that we have staff that love to be at our hospital,” says McWilliams. “When they hop onto Facebook and write ‘I love my job,’ what more could you ask for? Yes, everybody has tough days, but they feel like they matter, they’re part of the family. Based upon what I’ve heard from other veterinarians about their corporate experiences, I think there can be a big disconnect between people at the top and in the hospital—but I need to look our people in the eye, so their needs are my priority.”

Integrating East and West

authorized kennel staff to add a dose to the food of nervous or anxious dogs. "The whole tub might be \$30 and lasts months," she says. "I have to do less treatment for colitis for stress, my staff appreciates it because they're not cleaning up diarrhea, and clients see that their dogs did well here."

Another of her favorites is "Yunnan Baiyao," a powder she uses during surgeries and dental extractions. "You can put it in any open wound and it helps stop bleeding," she says. "Nothing messes up your surgery field like blood. It's good for the animal and helps us get through procedures faster and do the job better." The amount used during a surgery costs her only a dollar or two. "It's just a tool we can use if needed, like gauze," she says.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM) can be a useful tool for any veterinarian. "I don't expect everybody to learn how to do acupuncture, since that takes years of training, but the herbals offer so much help," says McWilliams.

LOOKING AHEAD

McWilliams has high hopes for integrative medicine, especially as TCVM becomes part of the curriculum at some veterinary schools, such as University of Florida and Virginia Tech. "I see a slow and steady continued acceptance, as long as the research continues to be there," she says. "I really hope that it becomes the new standard of care, at least on the herbal side."

TCVM has become an accepted part of her practice. In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, client requests for acupuncture went up. "We've tried to abide by the governor's request to provide essential medicine only, but our clients feel like it is," she says. "I have paralyzed Dachshunds, renal-failure kitties, large dogs with arthritis ... if they can't walk, isn't that essential?" ■

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