

## Physical therapy for canines

By Mary Kate Dubuss  
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After orthopedic surgery, most human patients go through the rigors of physical therapy. They will stretch, repeat a regimen of assigned exercises and meet with their therapists until they are fully recovered.

Such surgeries, once almost exclusively for humans, are now commonplace among dogs. It's that post-surgery physical therapy that is less available for members of the animal kingdom.

That is where veterinarian Suzanne Starr comes in. At her new office on North Main Street, she offers animals acupuncture and leads them in a variety of exercises meant to completely rehabilitate their limbs. Some of the patients have been in accidents, but most are older dogs. Like their owners, dogs are living longer today thanks to the advanced medical care now available. Hip and knee problems are both prevalent canine maladies, but torn knee ligaments are the most common, Starr said.

"There is a gap in animal care... animals are living longer," she said.

Paws in Motion, Starr's veterinary rehabilitation clinic, opened in 2004. While working as a veterinarian in Milford, she said she noticed a lack of post-surgery options for pets. Complicated procedures like hip replacement surgeries are becoming more normal and follow-up treatment is necessary, said Starr.

Today, Starr's business seems to thrive - clients travel from West Roxbury, Revere and Pepperell for the treatments.

"Their are advances in arthritis management. People are looking for more options," she said.

In addition to pre- and post-surgery therapy, Starr's treatments will help with chronic problems like hip dysplasia and arthritis.

Walk into Starr's office and it is hard to tell it is designed for our four-legged companions. Relaxing instrumental music wafts through the treatment rooms and large colorful exercise balls and a treadmill are also set up. Starr has all her patients lie on soft mattresses on the floor since tables can make dogs nervous.

"[We] try not to be like a regular hospital," she said.

Often more mainstream veterinarians refer patients to Starr. Most of Starr's current patients are from referrals.

"I try to make myself known to local vets."

Some dogs exercise on the hydro- treadmill, a \$35,000 machine that Starr stands in with her patients, coaxing them along. The water, heated and chlorinated, fills from the bottom once the animal is already inside, so the tiniest dachshund or a muscular German

shepherd can use the machine. Usually the animals are receptive to the water, but Starr said they can be nervous if it is their first time in such a machine.

Submerging a dog's limbs under water makes the animal lighter and more buoyant, so there is less pressure on its joints, Starr said. The treatment helps reduce swelling and the water provides resistance so when the pets walk they are gently working their muscles.

"It helps [the patient] retrain a normal gait," said Starr, a Franklin resident. "The treadmill [offers] control," to their pace.

Before opening Paws in Motion, Starr spent time at Tops Veterinary Rehab in Chicago. Opened by Dr. Laurie McCauley in 1998, it was one of the country's first physical therapy centers for dogs and first to use a hydro-treadmill.

Hydro-treadmills were initially used for race horses in the 1970s and people began using them for their own rehabilitation in the mid-1980s.

A Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine graduate, Starr was also trained in canine rehabilitation at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

Exercise balls, ubiquitous to gyms and human physical therapy offices, are also a big part of Starr's program.

Smaller dogs can stand atop the balls to strengthen their balance and larger dogs often put their front paws on one. Starr will have her patients place one paw on an exercise ball to encourage it to place more weight on a limb, too. She also has some dogs walk on a traditional treadmill and offers massage and heat therapy.

Starr said she mostly treats Labradors, German Shepherds and Golden Retrievers for joint problems. All of Starr's patients are dogs, with the exception of one cat. She said she is open to treating cats, but fewer feline owners seek out

Each one of Starr's treatments takes about an hour. She normally sees a dog for two or three months. In this business, success is measured by the range of motion an animal gains or its increase flexibility or use of a certain limb.

Starr's favorite part of her job is watching a dog's progress and making contact with her furry clients.

As a regular veterinarian, Starr would see an animal for 15 minutes.

"Here I spend an hour two times a week, I like it a lot," she said. "I feel like I'm making a difference, not just prescribing medications."



Ivy McKenzie of Needham watches as

her German Shepherd, Ally, walks on an underwater treadmill. She had been hit by a car in October and is undergoing therapy to improve movement in her right front leg. (Allan Jung photo)