

Class IV Laser Sheds New Light on Treatment of Elderly Animals

By Dennis Arp

How best to measure the effectiveness of treatment with a Class IV laser? For Karen Miller Becnel, DVM, there is no better gauge than the Buddy system.

Buddy is her own 14-year-old cat, who for years suffered from polyarthritis. By January, his condition had gotten so bad that she was considering putting him down.

This is the same Buddy that had flunked acupuncture and had become so high-strung and crabby that he only let Dr. Miller Becnel even consider treating him with her new LiteCure laser if the beam came from afar, and then only when his favorite technician eased him into position.



That was until Buddy felt the warmth in his joints and learned to associate the intense light with waves of relief. More than three months into his treatment, he has regained mobility and a level of comfort Dr. Miller Becnel thought might be unreachable.

“The therapy has made believers out of all of us here,” says Miller Becnel, the owner-operator of The Cat Hospital of Metairie in Louisiana. “It’s a wonderful thing.”

For veterinarians who treat a lot of geriatric and arthritic patients, the Class IV laser is a difference-maker, practitioners say, providing new degrees of relief.

The results can boost the spirits of clients and staff as well as the pets being treated, even as those results can also open new realms of revenue generation.

“In my own case, I’ve seen enough improvement to know what clients are feeling,” Miller Becnel says, “and what it means to see a geriatric pet doing better.”

Use of therapeutic lasers is relatively new to veterinary medicine, with wider acceptance of its benefits developing over the past three years, industry insiders say. A major hurdle was cleared in February 2007, when the Food and Drug Administration gave its stamp of approval.

Class IV lasers are about 50 times stronger than Class III predecessors, which had previously achieved mixed results, says Brian Pryor, Ph.D., president of LiteCure, which makes the Companion Therapy Laser.

The Class IV therapeutic laser allows for better tissue penetration in a shorter amount of time, Pryor says. Practitioners are finding a variety of uses, including the treatment of infections, disc pain and to help speed healing after surgery.

But because the Class IV laser reduces inflammation, improves blood flow and releases natural endorphins, a growing number of practitioners are using it to relieve the chronic pain of aging and arthritic pets.

Jeffrey A. Richman, DVM, owner of Richman Animal Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, added a Class IV laser to his practice early in 2008. First, he had to overcome his own skepticism.

“It was a leap for me because it wasn’t really viewed as mainstream,” he says. “For a couple of years, a friend who assists an equine veterinarian in Texas kept telling me about the amazing things they were doing. Then a rep showed up here, and I kind of listened with half an ear, and what I heard made sense.

“I have so many old dogs who are hurting, and my clients are very attached to them. Some of those dogs aren’t able to take NSAIDs, so I took a flier, and I’m happy I did.”

Dr. Richman incorporated the therapeutic laser into his arthritis-treatment arsenal, which includes non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, Adequan injections, glucosamine, nutraceuticals and prescription diets.

But it all starts with an exam, X-rays and careful diagnosis, he says.

“For the laser to work, you have to pinpoint the precise area of need.”

When Richman recommends laser therapy, almost all clients are receptive, he says.

“A big selling point is that it’s not invasive, it doesn’t hurt and the animal doesn’t have to be sedated. I also offer clients the chance to come back and see the treatments, so they feel more comfortable.”

Laser treatment protocols vary from doctor to doctor and according to the severity of the case, the size of the animal and other factors. But Richman does offer a basic seven-treatment arthritis package: three treatments the first week, two the next and then one treatment each of the next two weeks. The price is typically \$300 to \$350, depending on the number and size of the areas to be treated.

A chronic case such as an arthritic pet does need ongoing treatment, practitioners say, but the good news is that the effects are cumulative, so the intervals between treatments often can be extended.

Practitioners speak of success rates above 90 percent, with some animals going from immobility and nearly constant discomfort to being able to climb stairs and go for walks again.

“We pretty much know by the end of the first session if the therapy is going to be successful,” says James Gaynor, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACVA and medical director of the Animal Anesthesia and Pain Management Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“We see a lot of dogs that have been through multiple therapies and might even have their joint pain under control, but they are still not functional or comfortable because of their muscular pain. It’s great to have this additional tool to increase their pain control.”

Seeing pets go from the euthanasia list to functioning again restores smiles to clients and also lifts the spirits of staff members, practitioners say.

“A lot of times it’s more hands-on for our veterinary nurses, and they feel more personally involved in helping a pet feel better,” Miller Becnel says.

As the job satisfaction rates of staff members rise, Richman has also seen his client list grow. He sent out press releases soon after he became the only veterinary practice in the Cleveland area he knows of to offer laser therapy.

The local paper did an article, and three TV stations did reports. Now about one-fourth of his clients are new, with many of them bringing in elderly pets.

“Laser therapy isn’t a panacea, and I don’t present it that way,” he says. “I say it will probably help, and I price it realistically.”

Richman leases his \$26,000 Class IV laser unit, and says it is more than paying for itself each month.

Of course, the most important payoff is to see suffering subside. For Miller Becnel, that victory really hits home.

“There isn’t a whole lot better thing you can do for elderly animals than to restore a level of comfort,” she says. “It’s not just about extending their lives; it’s about improving the quality of their lives.”