

Nature's cures for animals

One veterinarian looks at how to heal a dog without using drugs

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It's one thing for me to order the occasional side of fries and to ignore my doctor's advice to get more exercise. But a woman's best friend is a different matter.

Nothing is too good for my golden retriever, Brandy, who gets premium kibble, at least three walks a day and her own spot on the couch. So when she started having seizures and my regular vet suggested she might have to start taking a heavy-duty drug to control them, I wanted a second opinion.

Dr. Susan Krakauer, who calls herself "The Roving Vet," brought it right to my door. Krakauer -- who will be part of the Wellness Show this weekend at the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre -- specializes in homeopathic veterinary care, and she visits four-legged patients in their own homes.



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay

Vancouver Sun / Surging popularity of homeopathic cures for pets: Dr. Susan Krakauer, 'The Roving Vet' who specializes in homeopathic care, makes a house call to check out Brandy after she started having seizures.

Krakauer says she became interested in homeopathy even before she attended veterinary school. After graduation, she worked at the Vancouver Animal Emergency Clinic, "where you see conventional medicine at its best, treating trauma and shock," she says.

But she also saw dogs and cats with chronic illnesses who would be brought to the clinic when their symptoms worsened. Conventional drug treatment sometimes stabilized them, she says, but they would often end up coming back when the disease flared up again.

"With conventional medicine, there are so many dead ends," Krakauer says. "You often find you are kind of managing symptoms, but you are never really making the animal better. So I just felt intuitively that there must be other forms of medicine that actually get to the root of these problems."

Homeopathy, which dates back to the 1700s, focuses on treating the whole person or animal rather than a specific ailment. It's based on the theory that small doses of natural substances can stimulate the body's ability to heal itself.

Brandy, for example, "may be a dog that always had an underlying susceptibility to seizures, and it just took something to upset her system and trigger them," she says. So the goal of homeopathic treatment would be to rebalance her immune system, with the hope that would stop the seizures.

Krakauer gave my gorgeous girl the once-over in her favourite spot on the living-room carpet and asked me dozens of questions about her eating and sleeping habits, temperament, history and behaviour. All those things are key to determining how to treat animals, she says, because they can't explain how they're feeling.

Reviewing Brandy's medical records, Krakauer zeroed in on a slew of vaccinations she got last spring for everything from Lyme disease to leptospirosis. She called it "highly suspicious" that Brandy started having seizures shortly after getting those shots, "but it's not 100 per cent."

Krakauer acknowledges that vaccinations are "such a controversial area" in veterinary circles. But she believes most conventional vets give too many vaccines for diseases that are rare, especially in adult dogs and cats.

"We don't vaccinate people nearly as much as we vaccinate animals," she points out. And many vaccines that are given yearly can protect against disease for years or even for life, she says.

"There is no scientific evidence for yearly vaccines," Krakauer says. "The most progressive veterinary clinics and vet schools are moving toward every three years, but even then there's no evidence they need them that often. Most of these things are puppy diseases and they have immunity from their very first shot."

Whether or not vaccines can trigger some illnesses -- and it's a theory not all veterinarians share -- Krakauer says immune-system disorders are becoming increasingly prevalent in household pets. "Every dog on the block has skin allergies, ear infections, food allergies, epilepsy or even cancer -- we're seeing cancer in younger and younger animals."

And that's where she believes homeopathy can play a role, by bolstering the immune system to prevent disease and stop symptoms from recurring.

The effectiveness of homeopathy often depends on how clear the symptoms are and how long they have been going on, says Krakauer.

"There are cases where it works just as quickly as conventional medicine and it lasts much longer," she says. "But often people come to me when it's been going on for a while. They have already tried conventional medicine and there aren't clear symptoms because they have already been treated and suppressed."

So treatment can involve a bit of trial and error. For Brandy, Krakauer prescribed belladonna, a diluted, granular form of a plant that's toxic in high doses. She also suggested that I switch her diet from kibble to raw meats and vegetables, supplemented with raw bones for added calcium -- another theory that I know has both proponents and detractors among veterinarians and dog owners.

But I'm willing to give both a try before I consider putting Brandy on a drug that has a risk of serious side effects and that she might have to take for months, years or even the rest of her life.

Krakauer says she sometimes prescribes conventional drugs in life-threatening cases, or when homeopathy hasn't worked and the animal is getting sicker. "Ideally, if I could treat everything homeopathically, that would be great, but I don't want my patients to die."

But increasingly, she finds pet owners are willing to try homeopathic remedies before they turn to drugs.

"I think people are starting to realize that conventional medicine has side effects -- it's not 100 per cent safe," says Krakauer. "And when you do get antibiotics and it takes care of a skin rash right away and you feel really great, the skin rash may come back a month or two later. So people are starting to realize it might not be getting to the root of a problem."

Interestingly, she's discovered some people are more interested in homeopathy for pets than for themselves.

"It's really funny -- I definitely see people who are interested in treating their animals holistically who don't do it for themselves. They've got huge drug cabinets, but they don't want to give their animals steroids or antibiotics."

I bet they don't let their golden retrievers eat French fries, either.

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To learn more about Dr. Susan Krakauer's practice, visit her website, www.rovingvet.com. For more information on homeopathy for animals, visit the Academy of Veterinary Homeopathy website, www.theavh.org.

WELLNESS SHOW PREVIEW

Pets are a big part of this year's Wellness Show, which runs Friday through Sunday at the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre, but people are also on the agenda.

Close to 300 exhibitors will be on hand to showcase the latest in nutrition, fitness and health products and services, and there are workshops, demonstrations and seminars on a variety of topics, ranging from healthy eating to cancer prevention.

A celebrity cooking stage will feature chefs from local restaurants and markets on all three days of the show, and you'll also get the chance to sample organic foods, teas, coffees and juices.

At the fitness demonstration stage, you can get the lowdown on everything from yoga to pole-walking.

For the first time, Sunday is "Healthy Hound Day," featuring an animal fashion show, dog-training demonstrations and talks by animal-care experts -- including Dr. Susan Krakauer of The Roving Vet -- on how to improve your pet's health.

For information on other events as well as ticket prices, visit the show's website, www.thewellnessshow.com.

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