Tending the Wind – Chapter 1
Introduction to Holistic Veterinary Medicine
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Holistic health care is becoming more popular as people experience the benefits of methods like acupuncture and homeopathy for themselves. And these days, more people are realizing the same benefits for their animal friends. Veterinary acupuncture is now offered by many conventional practices, and is available as a postgraduate course for veterinarians at several locations nationwide. Other modalities are starting to receive similar attention by the veterinary community as doctors see the benefits in their own patients, and as clients become more aware of and request holistic options. Those new to the holistic scene come across an almost dizzying array of information in books and on websites, some more accurate and impartial, and others less so. A number of "how-to" books are also available, but they often lack a detailed explanation of the theories behind the recommended treatments. This text is offered as an introduction to holistic medicine for both the general public and veterinary professionals with particular focus on the theories behind the practice. Understanding basic theory is essential to effective treatment, and to the comfort level of those clients and doctors exploring holistic care.

Some readers will already be well versed in holistic terminology, but for those who have been curious but haven't yet taken the first steps, we should begin at the beginning. What exactly does *holistic* mean? And why are there so many other terms used to describe the same category of therapies?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word *holistic* as: "Of or relating to *holism* [the theory that living matter or reality is made up of organic or unified wholes that are greater than the simple sum of their parts]; emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts; concerned with wholes rather than analysis or separation into parts (as in *holistic medicine*)." Remembering this definition will help us stay on track as we discuss holistic veterinary medicine. Quite often people think it refers to a certain modality or type of medication, but it's actually a frame of mind rather than a particular tactic.

The healing modalities commonly practiced by holistic veterinarians are those which utilize this mindset. Chinese medicine, homeopathy, and others all begin with the understanding that we and our animal friends are more than the sum of our parts. Health involves the harmonious interplay of not only organic systems and structures, but also other aspects of a being (mental/emotional health, social interaction, physical activity, eating habits, etc.) that all affect and are affected by each other. Each part reflects information about the whole in its own way. Conversely, disease involves more than just a malfunction in one organ, and so the whole being must be treated. If one part is treated without treating the whole, disease will simply return in another way. Holistic methods like acupuncture and homeopathy seek to identify and treat the whole pattern of disharmony in a patient, resulting in resolution of multiple imbalances at once. This approach may not be necessary for a simple one-time ailment (e.g. kennel cough), but is invaluable for recurrent, complex, or chronic problems. Conventional medicine can certainly be part of a holistic approach, but is not itself based on the holistic paradigm (e.g. which antibiotic to use does not depend on the patient's personality traits, sleeping habits, or prior "unrelated" issues). In treating broad patterns of disharmony, holistic medicine would also tend to prevent potential illness that may have been generated by those patterns if left untreated. As with any medicine, holistic therapies work better when treatment is begun sooner than later, and are dependent for their success on a good diet, appropriate exercise, and a loving home environment.

The term *alternative* is also used to describe methods like acupuncture, but it simply refers to the idea that these methods exist "outside traditional or established institutions or systems." (The established institution in our case refers to Western conventional medicine.) This term is actually rather unfortunate, since it fails to convey the

established longevity of these methods (acupuncture is at least 3,000 years old), or the fact that they can be used effectively alongside conventional medicine.

To remedy this, another term has come into favor: *complementary* (not complimentary), which refers to "something that completes, makes up a whole, or brings to perfection." Methods like acupuncture can serve to enhance, or complete, conventional tactics. An example is the use of herbs and acupuncture after knee surgery to enhance recovery. A common acronym used these days in the profession is CAVM: Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine. Its human counterpart is simply CAM.

One last general term to know is *naturopathy*: "A system of therapy that relies on natural remedies, such as sunlight supplemented with diet and massage to treat illness." By definition, any veterinarian who uses herbs, glandulars, and the like is employing naturopathic techniques. It simply refers to the natural origin of the chosen treatment.

Whatever term one chooses, it's important to remember that no single method is the sole key to treatment. Alternative and conventional medicine are complementary parts of a greater holistic approach to healing. Patients can benefit from all medical options at different times, in combination or alone, depending on the situation. Furthermore, each method is continually changing and adapting, along with the people who study and practice them.

The remainder of this work will discuss some of the most commonly used holistic and alternative veterinary methods, and a few other related concepts. The modalities and theories presented here naturally reflect the experience and understanding of the author, which like those of any practitioner, are constantly growing and changing. This text simply reflects a moment in that progression. The reader is encouraged to take what is useful at this moment in his or her own progression, assimilate it, metabolize it, transform it into new experience, and perhaps save the rest for another moment. Nothing is set in stone, and true understanding is aided by a healthy distance from too much information. People need sufficient time and space for personal reflection and creative inspiration. As the poet Charles Wright says, "*One has to learn to leave things alone. It's best to keep unwritten as much as possible. Poetry is just the shadow of the dog. It helps us to know the dog is around, but it's not the dog. The dog is elsewhere, and constantly on the move.*"