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Fido? He's in rehab -- for his knee (or is it his elbow?)

A Santa Monica clinic provides physical therapy for dogs, cats -- even a rabbit. The regimens and treatments look familiar to anyone who's undergone rehabilitation.

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They come in with arthritis, back pain, sore elbows. Some are recuperating from car accidents or surgery or just bad judgment (a leap off a balcony). Others are coping with the ravages of old age. The most common problem: a tear of that pesky knee ligament, the ACL. They work out on treadmills, strengthen their core muscles, get their joints manipulated and undergo acupuncture.

They are patients of California Animal Rehabilitation, seeking physical therapy for pain relief and better mobility. They are mostly dogs, but the current clientele includes a few cats and a rabbit that lost its hop.

The clinic, which opened a year and a half ago in Santa Monica, is the brainchild of veterinarian Jessica Waldman, 33, and physical therapist Amy Kramer, 40, who holds a doctorate in her field. Technically, in California, what they do can't be called "physical therapy" -- that's only for humans.

But the big rehab room will look familiar to anyone who's been through a regimen of physical therapy: mats on the floor, colorful medicine balls in jelly bean shapes, meditation music wafting through the sound system.

Of course, other veterinarians in Southern California are doing acupuncture. And there are some area vets doing underwater treadmill work and rehab. But the two founders and owners say their facility is a unique combination of rehabilitation, acupuncture and nutrition counseling all under a vet's supervision.

"There are veterinarians that do acupuncture and there are people who like pets who do swim therapy, but there are no physical therapists that are doing rehab with veterinarians," said Waldman, who, like Kramer, has certification in canine rehabilitation.

"I would agree that what they are doing is unique in California," said veterinarian David Bruyette, medical director of the VCA West Los Angeles Animal Hospital, which engages a chiropractor three days a week. "There are some places in other parts of the country doing this, but there are no other places like this in Los Angeles."

In an era when people pack their dogs off to day care, consult veterinary behaviorists, put cats on Prozac and agree to aggressive surgeries to prolong their pets' lives and limbs, physical rehab may be uncommon. But it's not extraordinary.

Nor is California Animal Rehab the pet equivalent of a day spa, despite the pan-flute music. The majority of its dogs are suffering pain and compromised mobility. Some come in barely walking at all. Sonny, a yellow Lab who has been boarding at the facility since a car accident two weeks ago left him unable to move, can now walk with a harness on his hindquarters and staffers helping him along. "Pretty soon he'll be up and on his own," Waldman said.

This kind of care doesn't come cheap. An eight-week, twice-a-week treatment program at the clinic -- accompanied by a two-hour initial consultation -- costs a little over \$2,000. (They say they try to work with pet insurers.) A \$275 fee will get the consultation and a personalized home exercise and nutrition plan.

"People are demanding better care for their animals," Kramer said. "It makes people feel better knowing they did as much as they possibly could for their animals."

Both women have pets. Waldman and her husband have a dog, Tate, who often can be found curled up in the facility's office. Kramer has a dog and two cats.

On a recent day, about half a dozen dogs were being put through various stages of therapy. While Maggie, a trembling 10-year-old Chihuahua-terrier mix, was receiving acupuncture in one room, Nixon, an 8-year-old pit bull-beagle mix, walked on a treadmill submerged in a foot of water, heated to a balmy 85 degrees. Kramer says water therapy puts less stress on joints while building leg muscle strength.

"Some think it's fun, some think it's not, most are ambivalent," therapy assistant Dave Cardena said as he gently coaxed a succession of dogs through the routine.

Nixon was ambivalent this day, dutifully plodding ahead, calmed by the rubber cow toy he clutched in his mouth. His tail slapped the water like a wayward oar.

Corine Redmon, the owner of both Maggie and Nixon, was walking her two dogs in September when all of them were struck by a car -- and all suffered ACL tears. "I'm in physical therapy three days a week and they're in physical therapy two days a week," said Redmon, a massage therapist.

"He's like a puppy again," she added, marveling at Nixon's improvement.

Veterinary referrals account for most of the business at the clinic, sometimes known by the acronym CARE.

"We send a great deal of patients to CARE," said Bruyette, "especially postoperative orthopedic and neurological patients that are going to require long-term physical therapy. The folks at CARE know what they are doing."

As this kind of therapy becomes more common, Bruyette said, he's concerned that people offering it be properly trained. Veterinarian Bill Grant, president of

the California Veterinary Medical Assn., echoes that: "As long as there is veterinary supervision on site, I think these ancillary treatment modalities are fine."

Earlier, Nixon lay prone on a mat as Kramer massaged his muscles and stretched his back right leg to improve flexibility.

"The first time I walked in, I thought, 'How is this going to work?' " said Jan Wieringa, a commercial producer and owner of Alaska, a Siberian Husky who's nearing her 12th birthday. "All these dogs together? But I haven't seen one skirmish."

Alaska, bedeviled by back pain, cancer in her front left leg and recuperation from surgery for an ACL tear, was gamely walking on an inclined dry treadmill. She's also carrying an extra 10 pounds.

"It's so hard to lose weight," Wieringa -- herself tall and slender -- said with a sigh. "She just lives for food."

Waldman's and Kramer's most delicate task involves jolting the egos of sensitive owners when they tell them that their pets with sore joints are, well, fat. "Ninety-five percent of the pets that come in here are overweight," Kramer said.

Most owners accept that diagnosis. "We do have a few clients who are actually appalled that we tell them that their pet is overweight," Kramer added. "They're like, 'Nooo, he's just a big boy!' "

Back in the water therapy room, Blackjack, a 2-year-old Bernese mountain dog, confidently trod on the treadmill, his plume of tail held high above the 20 inches of water in the tank. After an eight-week course of rehab, his arthritic elbows -- yes, dogs have elbows -- are better, and he's shed 10 pounds from his massive body.

"I have some relatives visiting and I said, 'I have to pick up my dog from physical therapy,' " said Sharon Graves, a venture capitalist, as she waited in the reception area for Blackjack. "And they started laughing and said, 'That's such an L.A. thing.' I said, 'You don't understand. It's helping!' "

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