Physical Rehabilitation Optimizes Recovery in Animal Patients

Veterinary physical rehabilitation—often indicated to maximize the functional potential of animals following injury, surgery or disability—is an expanding field.

Both the AVMA and American Physical Therapy Association have adopted positions that support the collaboration of veterinarians and physical therapists to provide benefits to both patient and hospital.

“Physical therapy, an established field of licensed health care professionals who diagnose and manage movement dysfunction in people, has been important to human medicine for more than 80 years,” says Jackie Woelz, MS, PT, supervisor of the Physical Rehabilitation Service of the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital (VMTH).

“Through clinical findings and research, we are learning that many of the same principles and treatment techniques used for decades to reverse or minimize impairment in people may be extended to veterinary patients.”

The Physical Rehabilitation Service, opened in 2004 in the new Center for Companion Animal Health, works with neurology, orthopedics, medicine, oncology and ICU patients.

Rehabilitation can support a variety of goals, such as to alleviate pain; aid recovery from soft tissue injuries, joint injuries, orthopedic surgery or neurosurgery; correct gait abnormalities; or provide conditioning for geriatric animals.

Rehabilitation techniques include postural, gait and proprioceptive training, therapeutic exercise, hydrotherapy, custom orthotic fabrication, manual therapy and other modalities, such as cryotherapy and neuromuscular electrical stimulation.

“Although we utilize various therapeutic modalities and exercise equipment, we also use manual techniques for assessing and addressing soft tissue restrictions, range of motion, quality of muscle tone and strength in order to guide therapeutic exercise,” says Ms. Woelz. She and VMTH veterinarians communicate throughout evaluation and the course of therapy, and each case is actively reassessed according to patient progress.

The UC Davis service is the largest of the few physical rehabilitation facilities associated with a veterinary school.

“We see amazing and complicated cases here—particularly in neurology and orthopedics,” says Ms. Woelz. It’s a wonderful challenge, because you never know what is going to be presented, and every patient has a unique set of needs.”