

Water therapy makes dogs more mobile

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Sister Frias with one of her patients

The Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria (UP) offers a rehabilitation service that helps animals immobilised by injury, disease or post-operative restrictions to regain as much mobility as possible. The Onderstepoort Animal Rehabilitation Service (OARS) offers intensive, one-on-one treatment for small animals that have undergone orthopaedic and neurological surgery, as well as animals with other conditions that cause pain and restrict mobility.

Just as in humans, correct post-operative care in animals is imperative to the successful recovery process. The OARS works mainly with dogs that have had spinal surgery or other orthopaedic and neurological interventions, as well as geriatric dogs suffering from arthritis. The treatments available at the OARS also help obese animals to lose weight by means of controlled cardiovascular training.

The OARS is managed by Sister Theresa Frias, who does most of the treatments herself, but is also assisted by veterinary nursing and veterinary students who gain invaluable training in animal rehabilitation techniques and methods. Sister Frias is a qualified veterinary nurse and has a wealth of experience caring for canine and feline surgical patients. She received post-graduate animal rehabilitation training at the University of Tennessee in the USA and is a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner who has been dedicated to her rehabilitation patients since the inception of the service in 2008. Sister Frias says, 'While the work can be exceptionally rewarding, it demands a lot of patience and persistence to achieve the best results possible for the patient.'

The OARS has modern facilities that have been proved to be extremely effective in rehabilitation treatment, such as a pool designed specifically for hydrotherapy, as well as a hydro-treadmill and spa bath. Water has long been known to be highly effective in assisting with spinal and orthopaedic recovery as the buoyancy supports the patient and reduces impact on painful joints while offering resistance to build and maintain muscle mass.

The hydro-treadmill is excellent for weak patients suffering from pain because they can derive all the benefits of walking without any negative impact on their joints. The treadmill is also an invaluable tool for the treatment of dogs that have had spinal surgery and need to learn how to walk again. Sister Frias usually gets in the pool and on the treadmill with her patients to assist their movements and also to ensure that they are comfortable and not scared.

While Sister Frias usually combines the use of the pool and the treadmill in her treatments, she finds that the treadmill on its own works better for dogs who do not like water because the dog still has its paws on the ground and therefore feels more in control.

Earlier this year the OARS received a spa bath with water jets. The spa is a useful treatment modality for patients with chronic arthritis because the jets can be positioned to massage painful joints and muscles.

Together with hydrotherapy, Sister Frias uses other equipment, such as exercise balls, which are often used in exercise routines for humans (eg Pilates) to strengthen the core muscles. A strong core is extremely important as it supports the spine and limbs. It is therefore essential to strengthen the core muscles of animals that have had spinal, hip or knee surgery. Sister Frias also uses balancing boards and special cushions to encourage patients to balance and remain upright and improve their using of their limbs.

The OARS also has electrotherapy equipment, such as light therapy and therapeutic ultrasound, which assists patients with the healing process and treat problems such as swelling and inflammation.

Although most of her patients are dogs, Sister Frias also treats cats. Like geriatric dogs, older cats can also suffer from arthritis. Sleeping for much of the day (as many cats do) tends to aggravate arthritis making an arthritic cat even stiffer and less mobile. While Sister Frias does sometimes use hydrotherapy for cats, cats in general do not like water and she has to resort to other innovative ways to get her feline patients moving, such as interactive games with toys and a laser light.

The use of hydrotherapy in premature foals is particularly interesting. Sister Frias has found hydrotherapy to be hugely beneficial for these fragile patients because the water is highly effective in strengthening their joints, ligaments and muscles.

A typical session lasts between 45 and 60 minutes and while the majority of her patients are patients in the Onderstepoort Veterinary Animal Hospital (OVAH), she also treats patients referred by private veterinarians. Throughout the rehabilitation process Sister Frias works closely with the patient's veterinarian to ensure that prescribed medication is administered for pain management control of inflammation.

Sister Frias has had numerous success stories of patients that initially seemed as if they would never regain mobility. Her commitment and ability to 'read' her patient, together with a dedicated owner who stuck to the treatment plan, ensured time and again that by the end of the treatment series, the patient was more mobile and had a better quality of life. And this, according to Sister Frias, is what makes her work so rewarding and worthwhile.