

# TIME

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## HEALTH

### Stem-Cell Therapy for Pets.

Sorry, people. A new treatment for ailing joints is only for pooches (and cats and horses)



BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

SOME PETS STOP JUMPING ON FURNITURE because they get disciplined; others stop because they get arthritis. Joint pain and stiffness can become so severe that many older dogs can barely walk, let alone lift a leg to urinate. Anti-inflammatory drugs can help, as can the four-legged equivalent of a wheelchair, but a new treatment using a combination of stem and precursor cells—which is so cutting edge it is not yet available for use in humans—appears promising. Consider the case of 4-year-old Blue. Last fall her veterinarian in Memphis, Tenn., recommended a full hip replacement to treat the German shepherd's hip dysplasia, a fairly common degenerative condition in dogs and cats, as well as

humans. Before deciding whether to make Blue undergo major surgery, her owner, Twila Waters, went to another local vet, Kathy Mitchener, to ease Blue's pain with acupuncture. But Mitchener had an even more unusual idea. She suggested a cell transplant to help Blue's hip repair itself.

The technique is being promoted by San Diego-based Vet-Stem, which launched an online training course in January to teach the procedure to vets around the country. Mitchener is one of more than 1,000 vets who have since logged on as the company moves to mainstream the use of stem and stemlike cells to treat arthritis and tendon and ligament injuries. In January, Mitchener removed some fat from Blue's abdomen and overnighted it to Vet-Stem, where centrifuges were used to extract a collec-

tion of cells with the greatest regenerative potential. The next day Mitchener injected these cells into Blue's hip. And within 36 hours, Waters says, "Blue was moving well and you could see an ease in her gait."

But when it comes to commercial stem-cell therapies, experts advise caution. Some firms may be pushing expensive treatments, says Sean Morrison, who runs a stem-cell lab at the University of Michigan, "that amount to modern snake oil."

#### VET-STEM BY THE NUMBERS

**\$2,000**

Typical cost of transplanting cells, derived from an animal's fat, into its ailing joints

**3,249**

Number of dogs and horses whose owners have paid vets for the procedure as of June

**80%**

Percentage that show improvement; fewer than 1% have a minor negative reaction

Vet-Stem, which is investigating whether transplanting fat-derived cells works in humans, reports that 80% of its animal patients show some sign of improvement and that the procedure poses few risks because patients are treated with their own cells. But stem cells don't come cheap. A cycle of Vet-Stem treatment generally costs upwards of \$2,000. (Canine hip replacement can cost four times as much.) The company's founder, Dr. Robert Harman, says that because of the big price tag, he initially thought wealthy horse owners would be his primary clientele. "Turns out there's not quite the same emotional attachment to horses as in the small-animal world," he says. "It used to be if your dog got sick, you just got a new dog. Now people want the best care, and they want to pay for it." ■

The logo for Vet-Stem features a stylized blue caduceus symbol to the left of the text "Vet-Stem" in a large, bold, blue font. Below "Vet-Stem" is the tagline "Regenerative Veterinary Medicine" in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font.