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Alternative treatments for pets a new business for veterinarians

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By Rachel Murray

Staff Writer

A local veterinary clinic is one of a few in the Dayton region now using stem cell therapy to treat pets — a growing national trend in pet care.

Bigger Road Veterinary Clinic, with locations in Kettering and Springboro, uses the innovative therapy to treat arthritis in pets, according to veterinarian Conan Crocker.

Roslyn, a 13-year-old collie, was forced to retire as a Miami Valley pet therapy dog last year because of her arthritis, said owner Karen Karavish.

"She couldn't walk the long halls of the nursing homes. She was having extreme discomfort, was in need of a large amount of pain medicine and she wasn't get any substantive relief," Karavish said.

Roslyn's first step in her stem cell therapy was to undergo a small surgery to remove fatty tissue. It was sent to Vet-Stem in California for stem cell extraction.

"This is not the type of stem cell found in the umbilical cord of babies. We are using a mesenchymal-derived stem cell from the pet's own fat. It has the ability to become different kinds of connective tissue in the body," Crocker said.

The discovery that there were stem cells in fat tissue was made at the University of Pittsburgh in 1998, and the first stem cell therapy case was in a horse in 2003. The first dog was treated in 2004, said Bob Harman, CEO and founder of Vet-Stem.

"It's a simple process that harnesses the cells natural ability to help the body heal. We put more of the cells on the front lines to fight in areas where you have chronic diseases or injury," Harman said.

More than 5,000 dogs and horses in the U.S. have undergone this therapy, and 75 to 80 percent show improvement, said Harman.

"There are no side effects, as long as you don't contaminate the samples in any way," Harman said.

He said he was so amazed by the results he saw in animals, he sought out stem cell therapy for his own damaged rotator cuff.

"Three years later, no surgery, I'm pain-free, and my shoulder is fully functional. It was just like what is being done on dogs and horses," Harman said.

However, the legality of the therapy for humans is now in question.

The clinics and doctors using stem cell therapy claim that because the donor is the patient, it falls under the practice of medicine or surgical transplant, but the FDA is now arguing approval is needed for these procedures to continue on human patients, Harman said.

When it comes to animals, the FDA approves stem cell therapy if the patient is the donor, according to Harman.

Roslyn's stem cells were extracted, processed, properly dosed, packaged in a syringe and sent back to the clinic.

The dog received injections in six joints. Within a week, she started showing improvement in her mobility, said Crocker.

It has now been two months, and Karavish said Roslyn's improvement is "phenomenal."

"She actually runs outside, and she's taking half of the pain medicine that she used to," Karavish said.

Crocker said he hopes more dog owners' take advantage of the stem cell innovation to improve their arthritic pet's well being.

The total cost for the procedure is \$3,000, and many pet insurance plans will cover some, if not all, of the cost, Harman said.

The Bigger Road Veterinary Clinic only offers the therapy to dogs and horses at this time, and subsequent treatments may be needed, Crocker said. The clinic in Springboro also will offer other forms of alternative pet medicine as part of a new expansion, which is set to be completed in April.

The facility will grow from 2,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet and will include an underwater treadmill for arthritic dogs.

The expansion also will create an indoor park-like atmosphere, complete with artificial trees, natural lighting, and a winding walkway to cottage-style exam rooms, in hopes of creating a "fear free experience" for cats and dogs.

"We will have a doggie daycare, and a puppy Montessori type of daycare where pets can come and stay and also get some training," said Crocker.

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