Complementary therapy: finding a way to make it pay

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Practice owners and managers are constantly looking for ways to improve the financial health of their business.

But once costs have been cut, prices optimised and every ounce of productivity squeezed from staff; finding those elusive extra profits can feel like looking for a needle in a haystack.

In these circumstances the prospect of developing a new revenue stream by offering complementary therapies can seem highly attractive.

Expanding the established service offering can be a minefield, however, so to throw light on what’s out there
VBJ spoke to three practices making complementary therapy pay.

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Mildmay Veterinary Centre in Winchester has been offering hydrotherapy from a purpose-built facility since 2001.

Over the past decade the CVS-owned practice has developed a reputation as a centre of excellence for this service with the therapy now forming a significant part of the practice’s income. VBJ spoke to clinical director Nikki Hoad.

Who carries out the hydrotherapy and what qualifications do they hold?

All hydro is carried out under veterinary referral by our hydrotherapist Louise Moray. She is a holder of ABC Level Three certificate in small animal hydrotherapy and is registered with the Canine Hydrotherapy Association – as is Mildmay itself.

How have you built your reputation as a centre for excellence?

New clients are made aware of our hydrotherapy service by a leaflet in their welcome pack and we often have a display on the waiting room wall.

Louise also regularly visits local vets to maintain awareness of the service and to allow them to put a face to the name in advertising literature – the personal touch is very important.

What conditions do your vets refer for?

Dogs are referred for a wide variety of orthopaedic and spinal conditions. Many cases are postoperative – dogs can swim within a few weeks of an orthopaedic operation and it is useful to build up muscle and strength that will have been lost over a period of time. The most common is cruciate rupture, but we also swim dogs that have had surgery for elbow dysplasia, hip replacements, patella luxation and fracture repairs. Hydrotherapy can also be useful for dogs suffering from orthopaedic conditions or as part of a weight loss programme.

How much has the practice invested in the hydrotherapy pool?

We had to remove the old pool in 2012 because it had developed a leak. We debated at the time about whether to invest in a treadmill instead, but felt we could swim a wider variety of animals in a pool. The new installation cost about £30,000 plus we bought some fibreglass pods, which are hung from the edge of the pool to provide somewhere for dogs to stand.

How much do hydrotherapy sessions cost and how do you package services to overcome price objections from clients?

The financial implications can make owners reluctant, but we offer packages of swims with a
discount and also point out most insurance companies will cover at least 10 sessions.

A rehabilitation swim costs £39.34 – this is usually between 30 minutes and one hour, depending on the case. An exercise or weight loss swim costs £24.72.

Swims for spinal patients, which can require two members of staff, are a little more expensive, but we do offer a 10% discount to clients that book and pay for 12 sessions in advance and for members of our Healthy Pet Club.

**What are the broad benefits offering hydrotherapy brings to Mildmay?**

Having the clients in the practice and using the pool definitely bonds them to us as it is a positive experience for clients and their pets. Also, Louise will often pick up on issues such as ear infections in her patients when she does a physical examination before each swim and will encourage the client to see a vet. She is also in a position to promote the sale of joint supplements and weight loss diets for example.

It brings in extra revenue and is a unique selling point for the practice. Louise has a good relationship with local practices and takes many referrals from them so this is also an extra revenue stream we would not have if we did not have the pool.

**Pennard Vets** is a small animal practice with sites in Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Allington and Borough Green.

The practice only began using laser therapy in 2013, but the technology is already turning a profit.

*VBJ spoke to managing director and head vet Matthew Flann.*

**Who carries out the laser therapy work in practice?**

Nurses mainly and sometimes vets, but we try for the vets not to do it as the price was constructed for nurses to do it under referral from the vets.

The vets either do the first and last in a course of six or the nurses do the whole course with the vets having separate reviews at the start and finish of a course.

**How much has the practice invested in laser technology?**

We bought two lasers for the practice two years ago for a cost of £40,000, but it makes us money and I would recommend it to practices similar to us.
How have you raised awareness of the service within your own team and with your clients?

We do a lot of internal CPD – intensive at the start and then case reviews every now and then with the vets mainly, and other teams as possible. In appropriate cases the benefits and effectiveness of the treatment are explained fully to the clients.

We always highlight positive reactions following successful treatment, especially speed of surgical wound healing, as well as resolution of traumatic wounds, but often it is part of a wider treatment plan so managing expectations at the start is important. That said, we have had some lovely cases where, for example, we may be maximising osteoarthritis (OA) treatment for a chronic case, use the laser and the mobility and well-being of the dog or cat increase significantly.

What conditions do you use laser therapy for?

OA, soft tissue injuries, wounds (both post-op surgical and traumatic/non-healing wounds) and stomatogingivitis.

How much do you charge for treatment and how big a part does laser therapy play in practice revenues?

The margin significantly reduces when vets administer the laser treatment and, from a management perspective, that can be a challenge to manage. After two years of use we are now receiving about £20,000 per year (net) in total from the two machines, so we are happy with the return on the investment so far.

We charge £10.83 for a post-op session, £30.63 for therapeutic sessions on one to three sites and £45.50 for four or more sites.

What are the broad benefits of offering laser therapy at Pennard?

The benefit is we can offer clients a wider range of options when treating cases. In addition, using the laser post-op speeds up wound healing on the routine and non-routine ops, so it not just the chronic pain cases. It is very much an important part of the overall high quality/standard of care we are able to offer our clients.

It helps with bonding clients, especially as there is often a positive outcome, and when performed by the nurses it creates a stronger client bond with them, which increases their self respect and happiness which – with the state of nursing supply – is very important in aiding nurse retention. It does also increase the bond with the practice and it results in increased footfall, and the indicators are overall annual spend also increases.
Broadlane Vets is a well-established two-site practice in Coventry.

The practice had offered acupuncture for 20 years and, following a brief hiatus, the service is thriving. VBJ spoke to Broadlane’s acupuncture vet Sophie Edward-Jenks.

Who carries out the acupuncture work and what qualifications do they hold?

I do all the acupuncture at Broadlane in dedicated clinics on Saturday afternoons – we chose this time as it is easier for clients to get to us, especially if they are booked into a series of treatments for their pet. I qualified through the Association of British Veterinary Acupuncturists.

How much of an investment has it been for the practice to offer acupuncture?

Of course, there is some expense involved initially, but it is relatively small. You need to pay for the training, which costs a few hundred pounds, and you also need to buy the single-use medical needles and you need the consulting space, but the costs are low.

How does the practice raise awareness of your acupuncture service?

When I started here we wrote to everyone who had had it [acupuncture] before and that helped introduce me and the way I work to the client base.

We give out leaflets and in the waiting room there is a big poster about acupuncture there as well. I also write the odd blog on the website about acupuncture and we find that has generated quite a bit of interest.

What conditions do you use acupuncture for?

Acupuncture is used mainly for OA conditions, such as muscle weakness in geriatric cats and dogs, although sometimes there are applications for cardiac, renal issues and epilepsy, normally in conjunction with ongoing traditional treatments.

How much do you charge for acupuncture and is it a profitable part of the business overall?

Clients are charged around £50 to £60 for the first session, which is about 30 minutes long, then it becomes slightly cheaper at about £45 for follow-up sessions.

We also offer discounts of 10% to OAP clients and it has definitely become part of the mainstream
in our practice.

It is important to stress this is all extra revenue, it is not a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, meaning this provides us with a fresh revenue stream as acupuncture is always offered in addition, rather than instead, of other treatments.

**What are the general benefits offering acupuncture brings to Broadlane Vets?**

We get a lot of referrals from other practices, which is great for us commercially as it obviously improves things for our patients too.

We have found offering acupuncture has been key in differentiating us from the competition and has really helped bring new clients in who may have had acupuncture for their pet at a previous practice.

It also provides a great opportunity to bond with clients and I think my colleagues really appreciate they have something else to offer, and obviously the clients value it as they can see we are doing everything for their pet.