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The Inspiration

My life changed after adopting my injured dog, Teddy. I was told by several veterinarians that his lameness would resolve with restricted activity and medications. Unfortunately, he was allergic to the prescribed medications, and became very ill. I went to many different veterinarians for second, third and fourth opinions, but none could help my Teddy.

Trained as a human physical therapist, I hoped that I could use my rehabilitation skills to relieve his pain; I knew, though, that I needed specialized training in canine anatomy and biomechanics. I searched the Internet at first with the intention of taking a canine anatomy course just so I could find how I could use some of my human-trained techniques on Teddy. But my search led me much deeper than I anticipated. It was during that time that I learned that certification in canine rehabilitation was possible, and found that the Canine Rehabilitation Institute was a good match for me. I was "all in" after that point.

Canine rehabilitation soon became my passion. Little did I know when I adopted my sweet Teddy that he would completely change my career direction and life (and the lives of many more of his species!). Canine rehab was a perfect fit for me as it meshed my love for dogs with a profession that I had already been successfully practicing for 12 years.

I was very fortunate to meet a leader in the field of veterinary medicine, Dr. Kenneth Bruecker, Board Certified Veterinary Surgeon. He was looking for a licensed physical therapist with advanced training in canine rehabilitation to lead his new rehab clinic within his highly regarded referral-only specialty hospital, Veterinary Medical and Surgical Group (VMSG). I worked with Dr. Bruecker and developed the new department, eventually leaving his practice to be closer to home following the birth of my first child.

I then teamed up with a local veterinarian, Dr. Dave Dawson, who completed his certification classes and created a canine rehabilitation clinic behind his existing practice called Hydropaws Animal Rehabilitation and Performance Center. Dr. Dawson was too busy to run both a veterinary hospital and a rehab clinic, and understood the importance of having a licensed physical therapist trained in canine rehabilitation as part of the team to grow the rehab center. I have been the Director of Hydropaws now for over 5 years; in addition to patient care, I am responsible for overall management, program development, training, and staffing.

The Practice

Hydropaws is a dedicated rehabilitation facility attached to a well-regarded veterinary hospital. The veterinary hospital has six veterinarians on staff. We have two underwater treadmills, a land treadmill, two class 3B cold laser units, an ultrasound/electrical stimulation combo unit, a portable neuromuscular electrical stimulation (NMES) unit, a portable TENS unit, a pulsed electromagnetic field (PEMF) mat, an Alpha-Stim machine, a treatment table, and a wide range of other equipment, ranging from physioballs, balance discs and wobble boards, to caveletti poles, a ramp, an exercise ladder and stairs.

We have about 45-55 visits each week, with some patients requiring multiple visits. The caseload consists of approximately 70% Ortho, 20% Neuro, and 10% Geriatrics. We employ three aides (one full time and two part-time, at approx 25-30 hours each), and benefit from the support staff of the adjacent veterinary hospital. As the only therapist, I frequently have waiting lists for new clients.

The Typical Visit

We require a veterinarian referral to begin the rehab process. Once it has been determined that the animal is medically stable to safely undergo rehabilitation, we receive the referral, obtain all medical records, and schedule an initial evaluation.

Upon a patient's first visit, we require intake paperwork, which includes a functional questionnaire (past and present functional abilities and client goals for rehab), and consent forms (right to use photography/video for treatment and marketing purposes, cancellation policy, etc.). Initial appointments require 75-90 minutes and they include a comprehensive evaluation and treatment for that day. During this time, I am assisted by an aide who helps with animal handling and documents my findings so my focus can remain on the patient and client. After a thorough assessment, I discuss my findings with the client. I then make my recommendations for a treatment plan to reach their specific goals and we schedule additional appointments, as needed. The client leaves with a solid understanding of what their pet is facing and what steps we are going to take to improve their quality of life and reach their goals based on as much evidence-based research as possible. Subsequent sessions then range from 30-75 minutes.

The Marketing Process

When I started at Hydropaws, I developed the logo and marketing materials, including business cards, brochures, educational materials, and small gift items (pens, water bottles, tote bags) to promote our brand. I went to every vet clinic in my area and dropped off my marketing collateral, with the hope of introducing myself and our practice to the veterinarians. I also offered a free staff education in-service visit to each clinic.

Unfortunately, my efforts met a great deal of resistance. Very few vets would give me any time at all, even for a brief introduction, and only one clinic took me up on my offer to do an in-service. It was discouraging to find that very few vets were open to hearing what I had to offer for the benefit of their patients.

But I persevered. I was asked to speak at a local kennel club, which went very well. As patients slowly trickled in, it was my outcomes that soon came to speak for themselves. Clients and vets started to see the dramatic improvements that rehab could bring, and business began to grow. Word of mouth is very important in my small community; I knew that nothing short of excellence would generate the buzz we needed to succeed.

I began attending two of the largest canine public adoption events in town, setting up booths, putting out our equipment, and talking to the festival-goers about what Hydropaws can offer. I receive terrific feedback at these events... from new people that we educate, to clients who just stop by our booth to say hi and share some smiles and wags.

In the beginning, I also held an open house and brought in a celebrity dog trainer and author, Tamar Geller, who had experienced first-hand the benefits of our services. We offered a meet-and-greet and book signing with Tamar and demonstrated our rehab techniques. Other marketing strategies: Website and Facebook... we post our inspiring patients for the community to see. I get consistent positive feedback from our Facebook page. I found that print ads were not cost effective, as the target market is too narrow for this medium.

Referrals come from specialty hospitals, primary care DVM's (from our affiliated veterinary practice as well as outside vets). Often, clients contact us directly to request rehab; in these cases, we contact the patient's primary DVM to obtain medical clearance before initiating rehab.

The Ingredients for Success

My experience in starting and directing a human physical therapy clinic earlier in my career helped to build Hydropaws into the success it is today. Additionally, strong interpersonal skills are critical to building healthy and trusting relationships within the community (both with vets and clients). And finally, passion for the profession must shine through; my clients sense my genuine effort to help their pets as if they were my own.

The Barriers to Success

In addition to experience, interpersonal skills, and passion, there is no substitute for specialized training. Most clinics that I see fail tend to hire the more economical, but often inadequately trained, person to render professional rehab services. This is not only bad medicine for the patients, but bad for the profession of canine rehab. Buying the fancy equipment, hanging a sign, and hiring a technician or aide to run the machines is not physical rehab. A licensed physical therapist with advanced training in canine rehab should be on staff in every canine rehab department.

Physical therapists have a unique and specialized skill set that veterinarian-trained rehab therapists do not have. Simply put, physical therapists and veterinarians have completely different educational backgrounds. Physical therapists provide expertise in rehab and manual skills, with a solid understanding of biomechanics, functional anatomy and kinesiology. It's not about one profession being better than the other.... it's about realizing that each profession has been trained in different aspects of health care, and we

can and should work together side by side to provide comprehensive care of mutual clients.

The Struggles

On a clinical level, it is difficult to hone my skills and brainstorm solutions to unique issues when there are no other qualified practitioners with whom to consult. In human practice, I was always one of a few other clinicians. This enabled all of us to work together and bounce ideas and techniques off each other in order to come up with the best treatment strategy. I don't have the benefit of this collaboration as the only certified rehab professional at Hydropaws.

Another unfortunate struggle is the apparent turf war between the professions of physical therapy and veterinary medicine. Given the obvious track record of success with canine physical therapists rendering canine rehab services, I have yet to understand why some veterinarians resist the development of this practice. I can only assume that some see this as a threat to their practice, that we are somehow taking a piece of the "veterinarian pie". This attitude in veterinarian medicine deeply saddens me.

Currently in the state of California, the Veterinarian Medical Board (VMB) is seeking to add language in their practice act which would put qualified therapists such as myself under the direct supervision of a veterinarian. This heavy-handed approach is defended by the VMB as a way to protect the consumer (which is indeed their job!). Unfortunately, what this kind of regulation does is limit the consumers' right to choose who they want to treat their pets. To protect this right, the California Association of Animal Physical Therapists (CAAPT) is lobbying against this strict, career-limiting language. As a member of this association, we believe that a veterinarian should be required to complete an examination and physical rehab could commence only after veterinary medical clearance is received stating that the animal is appropriate for treatment.

The physical therapist is trained and equipped to assess and treat. That training includes post-graduate education at either a Master's level or Doctorate level. To place strict guidelines of direct supervision by a veterinarian on a Masters or Doctorate-level physical therapist with advanced training in canine rehabilitation is incomprehensible. The regulation would deter physical therapists from even going into the field if they ever planned to work in California, as it would relegate them to the position of an aide; both monetary compensation and professional respect would be inadequate to entice therapists to pursue the field at all. Furthermore, the lack of canine rehab research is severely lacking; by restricting the pool of practicing physical therapists, the loss of their expertise will slow the advancement of evidence-based research.

Clearly, as in human physical therapy, regulation is needed to ensure the quality of canine therapists. But these regulations should allow advanced, trained physical therapists to work independently (if desired) and to own their own practices, as long as medical clearance is made for each patient, and communication is maintained with the referring veterinarian throughout the rehab process. This similar approach, already incorporated in veterinary practice acts in Nevada and Colorado (2005 and 2007 respectively), will yield

the best results for the patients. To date, there have been no complaints of harm or negligence to animals in rehabilitation provided by a physical therapist in these states or any other. The two professions ought to be allowed to work symbiotically for the benefit of our canine companions.

The Ongoing Pursuit of Excellence

Ideally, I would like to attend more continuing education courses. Being on the west coast of the United States, courses offered are few and far between. I observe surgeries when I can and consistently attend local vet lectures and seminars. I have also learned extensively through the Four Leg Rehab online educational website and participate in a VetRehab listserv online chat group, which connects canine rehab practitioners from all over the world.

And finally, I have spent time in other clinicians' practices. One noteworthy experience was spending a week at the Canine Fitness Centre, working with Laurie Edge-Hughes to hone my manual skills and develop new ones.

The Learnings... and Advice To Others

Looking back, I can see that I suffered from a lack of confidence. It is difficult to make the transition from human to canine rehab... not because of the anatomy, or the biomechanics, or the thought process and analytical skills required to assess a patient and develop an effective treatment program. It was simply difficult to navigate the veterinarian profession as a whole. I came from the human side of therapy where I was welcomed into the medical model of patient care and worked with other professionals as a team. Since veterinarian medicine lacks any allied health professionals, I found it very daunting to enter into the field.

You MUST be passionate about what you do. You must NOT be in it for financial gain. Just adding rehab for the sole reason of increased income potential within an already existing practice is a mistake. Rehab clinics are not running to the bank with profits. This can be a very satisfying career, with professional-level salaries. But a successful clinic takes time and requires highly qualified professionals.

Success can be defined in many ways; my definition is whether I have achieved professional competency that yields excellent clinical outcomes, I am continually growing professionally, I get personal enjoyment practicing my craft, and I am adequately compensated financially to help care for my family. Keep your focus fixed on high quality treatment, and excellent clinical outcomes will match your efforts. Once excellent clinical outcomes are attained, people will talk! Business will come to you when you are good at what you do. Your clients and their pets are your best advertisers... they will let others know how good you are, and your phone will be ringing with referrals!