

AVMA Guidelines for Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine

Introduction

These guidelines are intended to help veterinarians make informed and judicious decisions regarding medical approaches known by several terms including “complementary,” “alternative,” and “integrative.” Collectively, these approaches have been described as Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine (CAVM). The AVMA recognizes the interest in and use of these modalities and is open to their consideration.

The AVMA believes that all veterinary medicine, including CAVM, should be held to the same standards. Claims for safety and effectiveness ultimately should be proven by the scientific method. Circumstances commonly require that veterinarians extrapolate information when formulating a course of therapy. Veterinarians should exercise caution in such circumstances. Practices and philosophies that are ineffective or unsafe should be discarded.

Terminology

The identification of standard and broadly accepted definitions applicable to CAVM, including the definition of CAVM itself, is challenging. These guidelines identify CAVM as a heterogeneous group of preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic philosophies and practices. The theoretical bases and techniques of CAVM may diverge from veterinary medicine routinely taught in North American veterinary medical schools or may differ from current scientific knowledge, or both.

It is not the intent of these guidelines to determine or describe the relative value of the individual modalities. The evidence pertaining to, and the practice of, individual CAVM modalities differ. Current examples of CAVM include, but are not limited to, aroma therapy; Bach flower remedy therapy; energy therapy; low-energy photon therapy; magnetic field therapy; orthomolecular therapy; veterinary acupuncture, acupressure, and acupressure; veterinary homeopathy; veterinary manual or manipulative therapy (similar to osteopathy, chiropractic, or physical medicine and therapy); veterinary nutraceutical therapy; and veterinary phytotherapy.

Education, training, and certification

The AVMA believes veterinarians should ensure that they have the requisite skills and knowledge for any treatment modality they may consider using. The AVMA does not officially recognize diplomate-status or certificates other than those awarded by veterinary specialty organizations that are members of the AVMA American Board of Veterinary Specialties (ABVS), nor has it evaluated the training or education programs of other entities that provide such certificates. Recognition of a veterinary specialty organization by the AVMA requires demonstration of a substantial body of scientific knowledge. The AVMA encourages CAVM organizations to demonstrate such a body of knowledge.

Recommendations for patient care

The foremost objective in veterinary medicine is patient welfare. Ideally, sound veterinary medicine is effective, safe, proven, and holistic in that it considers all aspects of the animal patient in the context of its environment.

Diagnosis should be based on sound, accepted principles of veterinary medicine. Proven treatment methods should be discussed with the owner or authorized agent when presenting the treatment options available. Owner consent should be obtained prior to initiating any treatment, including CAVM.

Clients usually choose a medical course of action on the advice of their veterinarian. Recommendations for effective and safe care should be based on available scientific knowledge and the medical judgment of the veterinarian.

Responsibilities

State statutes define and regulate the practice of veterinary medicine including many aspects of CAVM. These guidelines support the requisite interaction described in the definition of the veterinarian-client-patient relationship.¹ Accordingly, a veterinarian should examine an animal and establish a preliminary diagnosis before any treatment is initiated.

The quality of studies and reports pertaining to CAVM varies; therefore, it is incumbent on a veterinarian to critically evaluate the literature and other sources of information. Veterinarians and organizations providing or promoting CAVM are encouraged to join with the AVMA in advocating sound research necessary to establish proof of safety and efficacy.

Medical records should meet statutory requirements. Information should be clear and complete. Records should contain documentation of client communications and owner consent.

In general, veterinarians should not use treatments that conflict with state or federal regulations. Veterinarians should be aware that animal nutritional supplements and botanicals typically are not subject to pre-marketing evaluation by the FDA for purity, safety, or efficacy and may contain active pharmacologic agents or unknown substances. Manufacturers of veterinary devices may not be required to obtain pre-marketing approval by the FDA for assurance of safety or efficacy. Data establishing the efficacy and safety of such products and devices should ultimately be demonstrated. To assure the safety of the food supply, veterinarians should be judicious in the use of products or devices for the treatment of food-producing animals.

If a human health hazard is anticipated in the course of a disease or as a result of therapy, it should be made known to the client.

References

1. Model Veterinary Practice Act, as published at the AVMA Web site, www.avma.org.