

## Getting Dogs

## In the Swim

Pool-based therapy can get canine patients back to pain-free movement

**T**rish Penick's clients don't have case workers, lawyers, insurance hassles or caps on treatment visits. They come to therapy minus the emotional baggage an injured athlete or worker might bring to the clinic, and are always enthusiastic and ready to work hard. Best of all, many of her clients experience a complete recovery from debilitating conditions that just five or 10 years ago were considered lifelong and terminal.

Treating the canine population, she told *ADVANCE*, has been rewarding. "Until recently, if a dog had a stroke or severe orthopedic problems, the only thing to do was to put the animal down," said Penick, PT, owner of Cutting Edge K9 Rehab, San Diego. "Now therapists are giving animals back to their families healthy again, and that's so exciting."

And one of the best ways to restore dogs to function, she continued, is through aquatic therapy. Water allows animals to increase strength and regain lost range of motion (ROM) without the pain experienced on land, and an earlier return to activity after surgery can be initiated since there is little or no stress on the joints while in the water.

#### Rehab for Dogs

At Cutting Edge K9 Rehab, Penick treats dogs with a wide variety of orthopedic and neurological conditions including arthritis, tendonitis, hip and elbow dysplasia, knee and shoulder injuries, stroke, disc herniation and paralysis. Of these conditions, she said, hip dysplasia and ACL tears are the two most common. "A lot of people used to think that hip dysplasia occurred only in older dogs, but it's really a degenerative problem that we're seeing in dogs as young as six months old," Penick explained. "And dogs may have ACL injuries from landing awkwardly after jumping or making sharp cuts while running."

Because Penick won't treat without a referral, most patients come to her clinic with a veterinarian's diagnosis. Like their human counterparts, however, therapy for dogs begins with a physical evaluation, including a neurological evaluation form and an orthopedic assessment for the dog's forelimb, hip, knee and spine. In addition, she will assess the dog's posture, gait and ROM, and check for evidence of muscle atrophy and swelling. "It's harder to evaluate dogs because you can't ask them what's wrong and they're pretty stoic—dogs don't cry much" unless they're in serious pain, said Penick. "But from looking at the dog it will be obvious if they're having trouble with their limbs, because they'll have difficulty with transitions and they might lean forward, back on their hind limbs or to the side."

#### Aquatic Therapy

One of the best ways to encourage dogs to use the affected limbs is by reducing weight-bearing in the pool. Cutting Edge K9 Rehab has two outdoor pools equipped with lifts that help dogs in and out of the water and serve as a resting place for when the dog is fatigued. Unlike the indoor Jacuzzi-style pools used in cold weather climates, the pools at Penick's clinic allow enough room for a dog or two, the therapist and an assistant.

Penick usually sees the patient for a 30-minute session to start, with most of that time spent "swimming" in the pool. Most dogs, she said, are natural swimmers. If the dog is having difficulty, however, Penick



manually assists them or occasionally uses a life preserver to keep it afloat. The owner assists the therapist by calling to the dog from across the pool. Meanwhile, the therapist makes sure the dog doesn't panic or flail, and may do manual therapy work on the affected limb while in the water.

"Ninety-five percent of the dogs are terrified the first time you get them in the water, but I've treated more than 200 dogs and most of them are fine after a few minutes in the pool," said Penick.

These benefits are most apparent when rehab is transitioned out of the pool. At that point, Penick may have the dog work on traversing hills and stairs, or use activities such as hind leg walking or "wheelbarrow walking" to isolate the forelimbs. "We might also use electrical stimulation to prevent muscle atrophy early on, but most of the treatment is active," she said. "A lot of the time is spent showing the owner things to do after rehab."

#### Learning the Ropes

Aside from the obvious differences in anatomy, therapists who want to work with the canine population risk injuring themselves or their patients if they don't have a good understanding of animal handling. "Dogs can't tell us if they're in pain or uncomfortable, so it's important to know how to handle them the right way," said Penick. PTs who are interested in working with dogs should not only take courses in canine anatomy and handling but should also observe a veterinarian while they treat. PTs should also note that only New Mexico's state practice act specifically mentions treating animals. For that reason, physical therapists not licensed in New Mexico cannot provide PT, or claim to be giving PT to animals. To avoid legal troubles, consult your state's PT practice act and licensing board before treating animals.

Those PTs with the right education and experience, however, may find that canine rehab is a growing field. The APTA's Animal Physical Therapy special interest group, part of the Orthopedic Section, offers courses on dog anatomy and other topics (a certification program has just become available through Northeast Seminars), and more veterinarians are enlisting therapists to help get their patients back to function. As more therapists like Penick move into the field, therapy could become the standard of care for canine patients. ■

*Mike Le Postollec is on staff at ADVANCE and can be reached at [mlepostollec@merion.com](mailto:mlepostollec@merion.com).*