

Treating Animals as a Chiropractor The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

With attribution to the venerable film maker Sergio Leone and his “Spaghetti Westerns,” his famous movie title will act as framework as we explore the many facets of Chiropractors venturing into the Veterinary milieu. At the end of the article after you apprise yourself of the reality on the ground and you desire to embark on a career plying your skills to help our animal companions I will explain how you can get started.

To begin with I think it appropriate to briefly delineate my bona fides and thereby dispel any notion that I’m merely “talking through my hat” when it comes to my hard won knowledge of this subject. If you are going to embark on this journey as I did years ago it’s better to “know before you go!”

I graduated summa cum laude from the Los Angeles College of Chiropractic in 1981. In 1983 I attended to my first animal patient, a paralyzed Dachshund who was slated to be euthanized. Days before, a patient of mine had described through a veil of tears her heartbreaking decision to end the life of her beloved companion after a month of paraplegia, with no improvement despite heavy doses of steroids. As perhaps any chiropractor would, and having no idea what I could possibly do, I offered to help if she obtained permission from her Veterinarian. As luck and perhaps fate would have it, to everyone’s amazement especially my own, the little Doxie stood, albeit unsteadily the day following his first adjustment. Lucky for me and my desperate patient, that little Dachshund's condition was relatively easy with subsequent adjustments to resolve with only what I knew from treating humans. I had no idea at the time, flush with success, that a large percentage of cases I would confront over the years would go beyond what I knew therapeutically at that moment in time.

Subsequently, that Doxie’s Vet and other open minded Vets in the area who had heard about my results began sending me their “basket cases.” These were all patients that had exhausted all Veterinary remedies and included such cases as dogs with failed back surgery; pets with recalcitrant, often incapacitating neck pain; dogs who were getting progressively more paretic and ataxic in the hind legs; dogs with non-resolving lameness, and so forth. Truth be told, I often found myself in the position of being the last one standing between someone’s beloved companion and their final resting place at Memorial Park. This was a very heavy emotional yoke to bear, but one that drove an unrelenting search for healing solutions in cases where I too was failing. A harsh task master especially for one who loves animals, but one that spurred numerous therapeutic discoveries in my right. You too will bear this if you begin treating small animals.

Since that first animal patient I have diligently explored, developed, and refined a unique therapeutic protocol, treating thousands and thousands of cases without self promotion or fanfare. Over time I have worked with Veterinarians in well over 50 clinics and hospitals around the San Francisco Bay Area and even a number in southern California. In 1999 I ended my human practice to devote all of my attention to helping animals and carrying on my own private research, which continues to this day.

That out of the way, let us explore the realities of working in Veterinary clinics and hospitals, helping to relieve the pain and suffering of animal patients, and filling a therapeutic niche that is demonstrably a “gaping hole” in the Veterinary armamentarium. Know going in however, that based upon years of experience, my well-founded opinion is that neither the Board of Chiropractic Examiners nor the Veterinary Board are enamored with the idea of Chiropractors straying beyond long held inter-professional boundaries and treating animals, regulations specifically allowing this notwithstanding. More on this later.

The Good

What is not only good, but great is the fact that if you love animals as I do, you get to spend your days helping to end the pain and suffering of every type of small animal you can imagine. How great is that? I have treated primarily Dogs and Cats over the years, with the occasional Rabbit, Chinchilla, and Guinea Pig showing up to challenge my skill set. Most of you reading this are perhaps unaware of the full impact of what can be accomplished with your two hands. I invite you to view my before and after videos on my new website to appreciate what is possible.

What is also fantastic is that you receive significantly more appreciation when helping someone's companion than you as a Chiropractor receive from treating human beings. How many times have you literally "saved some human patient's life," getting them off of disability, out of pain, and back to work only to have them "turn on you" because they thought their deductible had already been met? Pet owners are viscerally and eternally grateful and write glowing testimonials on Yelp.com if you can help their ailing companions.

Another fantastic aspect is that you get paid immediately. No waiting for capricious and arbitrary insurance companies to invariably pay you less than you billed for and all the attending headaches involved with getting paid for valid services rendered. Unlike humans, who complain that they need to stop coming because their insurance has changed or some other excuse, pet owners will frequently forgo even their own Chiropractic care in favor of care for their animal companion. This happens frequently in my practice.

Also you have no staff and the attendant staffing problems to deal with. No hiring, no firing, no payroll, no complaining, no training and no complying with ever onerous employment regulations. You work in a clinic or hospital and someone else deals with all of the inevitable headaches of running a business and you are thrilled to pay them a percentage of your services to deal with all of that "Bravo Sierra."

Also of note is that when I started out in 1983 very few people had heard about Chiropractors treating animals. Today that number is increasing exponentially and there are relatively few of us providing this service. So the future is potentially bright for Chiropractors who wish to learn to treat animals in a Veterinary setting.

Additionally on the expense side of the ledger, I pay only \$249 per year for malpractice liability insurance. Right or wrong, the law considers our pets chattel or physical property, and consequently malpractice suits in the Veterinary field are extremely uncommon.

Lastly you work with some of the smartest and most humble healthcare professionals you will ever deal with. Veterinarians I have found for the most part are also some of the most caring doctors anywhere. This I believe is because animals hold a special place in our hearts and most Veterinarians endure their years of rigorous education because of a love animals. I like to joke that this is the only profession where you can "pet," show affection to, and get kissed by your patients without going to jail or running afoul of a regulatory board.

Now with that, we will now delve into the "Bad" and the "Ugly" aspects of working in a Veterinary world and why you had better know and understand these realities before you decide to switch careers.

The Bad

“All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” Arthur Schopenhauer, German Philosopher (1788-1860)

I put it a different way. “If you build a better mousetrap the world will beat a path to your door. But not before well entrenched mousetrap makers with political connections attempt to destroy you and your new improved mousetrap!” Kelly Thompson, DC, Armchair Philosopher

As I mentioned above, based upon many correspondences and interactions with both Boards during investigations that I have had the unfortunate opportunity to defend against, it is my assertion that despite regulations that allow you as a Chiropractor to treat animals in the state of California the powers that be would really wish that you didn't.

For example, during one “donnybrook” with the Board of Chiropractic Examiners I was told by an enforcement representative that it is illegal to describe yourself as an Animal Chiropractor or promulgate in any medium that you perform “Animal Chiropractic.” The Board explicitly expressed to me that there is no such thing as, “Animal Chiropractic” in the state of California! I was merely writing about interesting cases on an obscure Animal Chiropractic forum and I was contacted, and told to cease and desist. I own the domain names, petchiropractor.com and animal-chiropractor.com and I can't use them for fear of Board reprisals. So my website is just kellythompsondc.com and there is no mention of Animal Chiropractic or Animal Chiropractor anywhere on my website. Ironically I personally know of a number of Veterinarians that advertise that they offer Chiropractic services and to date have never been taken to task by either Board for this misleading promotion.

Now let's address the specific regulations that apply to all Chiropractors that treat animals in California. I realize that I am perhaps in the minority in my opinion that Chiropractors should in fact work with Veterinarians while treating animal patients. I am not part of an organized association of Animal Chiropractors who want to treat animals autonomously and away from a Veterinary environment. Consider the following as an admonition to Chiropractors, who because of ideology, insist on what is called, "treating off of the reservation." First there are Regulations, specifically: Title 16 CCR § 2038. Musculoskeletal Manipulation. **Link:**

[https://govt.westlaw.com/calregs/Document/I95EB2100D48F11DEBC02831C6D6C108E?originationContext=Search+Result&listSource=Search&viewType=FullText&navigationPath=Search%2fv3%2fsearch%2fresults%2fnavigation%2fi0ad62d2e0000164238439ea0f0b627b%3fstartIndex%3d1%26Nav%3dREGULATION_PUBLICVIEW%26contextData%3d\(sc.Default\)&rank=3&list=REGULATION_PUBLICVIEW&transitionType=SearchItem&contextData=\(sc.Search\)&T2=2038&t_S1=CA+ADC+sFor Chiropractors in California](https://govt.westlaw.com/calregs/Document/I95EB2100D48F11DEBC02831C6D6C108E?originationContext=Search+Result&listSource=Search&viewType=FullText&navigationPath=Search%2fv3%2fsearch%2fresults%2fnavigation%2fi0ad62d2e0000164238439ea0f0b627b%3fstartIndex%3d1%26Nav%3dREGULATION_PUBLICVIEW%26contextData%3d(sc.Default)&rank=3&list=REGULATION_PUBLICVIEW&transitionType=SearchItem&contextData=(sc.Search)&T2=2038&t_S1=CA+ADC+sFor Chiropractors in California)

For Chiropractors in California this applies directly to you. So today if you are treating animals in your Chiropractic practice, whether you charge for this service or not, you are in violation of this regulation. As alluded to above, I have been on the receiving end of investigations by the California Veterinary Medical Board and the Board of Chiropractic Examiners over the years on more than one occasion. I can assure you that there is nothing like being greeted by your friendly neighborhood Postal person and signing for a certified, return receipt requested envelope from the Department of Consumer Affairs, Veterinary Medical Board to put a little more excitement into your day! I can also assure you that the process of resolving the, "misunderstanding" is always very long, very stressful, and very expensive. If you are actually

investigated and later cited for violating Section 2038, the Board of Chiropractic Examiners will subsequently open their own investigation and you will be fighting to save your license.

Additionally in the unlikely event that you are included in a malpractice case, it will again be reported to the Chiropractic Board and you are once again under investigation even if the plaintiff doesn't file a complaint with the Board of Chiropractic Examiners.

To drive the point home, let us mock up a very real and familiar scenario where a patient of yours asks you to take a look at their pet, who has apparently been suffering from some sort of ongoing back pain despite the best efforts of their Veterinarian. Being a kind and caring Chiropractor you oblige the pet owner, and you examine and then adjust their companion. You don't even charge them. That's just the kind of caring doctor you are. What could possibly go wrong? Let's say that you did an amazing job and their pet makes a miraculous recovery. Then during a previously scheduled follow-up appointment with their Veterinarian your patient expresses how wonderful you are as their Chiropractor and that the problem was resolved by your amazing skill and it only took one treatment. Now in a "perfect make believe world" where professional jealousies don't exist, that Vet would call you up and thank you for going out of your way to help their patient. Unfortunately in the real world in which we live, he or she will call the Vet Board instead and file a formal complaint against you and your world will be changed from that moment forward, and not in a good way!

Finally and perhaps most importantly for the animal patient, ask yourself if you can answer "yes" to any of the following questions, especially if you are currently treating animals in your clinic. What if your animal patient comes in "pain posturing" (head held down, back arched up, tail tucked under), can you tell the difference between pain caused by an acute T/L subluxation or disc herniation or the onset of pancreatitis or a clostridium infection causing pronounced abdominal pain? Can you tell the difference between neck spasms and pain caused by cervical subluxations or a fractured odontoid or syringomyelia or a severe lower cervical sprain with instability? Can you discern the difference between a limp caused by a small but developing Osteosarcoma of the femur and lameness caused by a cruciate ligament sprain or a subluxation of the hock? Can you distinguish between a dog that is unable to get up due to paraparesis of the hind end or a dog that is just profoundly weak and infirm due to illness? Can you determine if a patient is panting excessively because they are in pain or because they have mitral valve disease and congestive heart failure or perhaps canine cognitive dysfunction? Can you discern the difference between a dog's significant muscle hypertonicity and pain caused by a neck and back issues or the symptoms caused by a potentially lethal Tetanus Bacillus infection? Can you determine if a dog is non-weight bearing on a hind limb because of Root Signature or because of a pathologic fracture through the femur or perhaps a luxated femoral head, or a medial luxating patella? Can you determine if that front leg lameness is caused by Medial Shoulder Instability? If you as a Chiropractor can't say yes to these (and not even a seasoned Veterinarian can say yes to all of these based purely on presenting signs, symptoms, and a physical exam) then you have no business treating "off the reservation." Why am I so adamant? Every single one of these conditions have at one time or many times presented to me at a Veterinary clinic or hospital. Fortunately, working along side Veterinarians daily, these were ultimately sorted out to the benefit of myself and more importantly the patient and their owner.

The Ugly

If you have followed the link above and read the Section 2038 regulation you might wonder why the Veterinary profession opened itself up to competition from Chiropractors in the first place. At first blush it may seem counterintuitive to allow Chiropractors to treat animals and

thereby encroach on “Veterinary Turf.” Knowing the industry as well as I do, I can tell you that the Vet Board does everything in its power to eliminate any competition for their practitioners here in California. The following examples will illustrate this point. At one time Dog Groomers were able to perform Anal Gland expression as part of their routine activities for pet owners. The Vet Board put a stop to that some years back. At one time you could find a non-Vet who performed anesthesia-free dental cleanings. The Vet Board quashed that as well. It was also possible at one time for Dentists to “float the teeth” of horses. The Board quashed that also. So why would the Vet Board promulgate a regulation allowing doctors in another healthcare profession to infringe on their domain? It is my strong conviction that this action was calculated to obviate any possible legal filing that might be brought to challenge the primacy and exclusivity of Veterinary Medicine by Chiropractors inasmuch as they were keenly aware that Chiropractors were in fact treating animals in their human clinics. So the calculus was made, in my opinion, that if you make it legal under the direct supervision of a Veterinarian, an eminently reasonable and legally strong argument is made for the safety of animals at its core and any challenge of the regulation would be doomed from the outset. At the time Regulation 2038 was promulgated few if any Veterinarians were open to mixing Veterinary Medicine and Chiropractic. So there you have the classic “Hobson’s Choice.” This is very much akin to the perennial push by the Medical Pharmaceutical complex to make vitamins a prescription item.

However due to the law of unintended consequences the powers that be didn’t foresee rank and file Veterinarians increasingly opening their doors as they have so many times to Chiropractors such as myself.

Over the years and especially from 2007 going forward I have received numerous telephone calls ostensibly from pet owners asking me in the initial call to do things that would violate regulation 2038. One such incident was one of the more creative. The caller told me that she worked for the San Francisco Chronicle and wanted to do an article on me and what I was doing for animals. She offered to bring her animal companions down for an evaluation and treatment. She asked if she could come to my office to accomplish this interview. I told her that I worked out of Veterinary clinics and hospitals and that one of the Veterinarians would need to perform an initial examination before she could begin the interview. She responded, “well maybe I could come by your house and you could treat my Golden Retrievers there.” Fortunately this wasn’t my first rodeo dealing with potential new clients that attempted to “set me up.” I politely but firmly insisted that we set up a time at one of the Vet clinics I work with and she suddenly made a hasty, if inarticulate, retreat, “let me get back with you on that, goodbye.” I knew I would never hear from her again.

Then around 2013 suddenly nearly all referrals from Veterinarians I work with stopped for me literally over night. When I queried as to what had occurred, I was told that a letter went out to all Veterinarians in the state of California from the President of the California Veterinary Medical Association admonishing them to cease immediately referring patients to “alternative practitioners,” i.e. Chiropractors. Apparently there was a veiled threat in the letter to give it some weight. Now for the most part I receive a referral if an existing patient at the clinic specifically asks about a Chiropractor. Then the Veterinarians are happy to give them my name. So don’t expect that Veterinarians are going to begin referring to you to help you build your practice. Fortunately for me I have enough word of mouth referrals and favorable yelp reviews that I keep plenty busy.

Then in the summer of 2015 the Vet Board attempted to promulgate a new regulation designated, “Animal Rehabilitation 2038.5,” which would have essentially replaced Chiropractors with licensed Physical Therapists. If it had been adopted, over night Chiropractors would be have had to cease treating animals in California. Needless to say prior to the mandated “Comment Period” in September of 2015, my clients and I believe the clients of many others providing similar services wrote and called their representatives in droves and

we turned this around and prevented the adoption of this regulatory change. To date there are very few if any PT's treating animals in the state, so another "Hobson's Choice" apparently from the same playbook. I can tell you that from tone of the Vet Board representatives as described by many of my clients who made the effort to call, the Board was not at all happy with the overwhelming and negative response from the public. This will probably not be the last time we see this effort to push Chiropractors out of the Veterinary field.

So this is the up to date "state of play" as it exists on the ground for Chiropractors who are currently or are contemplating treating animals here in California. So knowing this, if you still want to begin treating animals, you can now proceed with your eyes open.

Steps to take to begin Helping Animals

The very first thing you need to do is to get some training beyond what you learned in Chiropractic College. This is essential. You will need to do some homework to find a course that suits you. There are a number of organizations and courses out there. I don't keep up with who is performing this service or who is the best and what they charge because it is of no consequence to my practice and never has been. What I can tell you is that whatever program you choose, they must teach you beyond simply treating spinal problems. So many of the musculoskeletal conditions I see daily require dealing with extremity issues. Ask them, if their instructors can find and fix a subluxation of the 4th metatarsophalangeal joint for example or a compression lesion of the glenohumeral joint causing lameness? Can you diagnose and rehab a dog with MSI, or Medial Shoulder Instability? Can you determine if a Cranial Cruciate Ligament is torn and to what degree and how to determine if this is a surgical case or one that might be amenable to a non-surgical approach. Can you diagnose the difference between lameness caused by Root Signature and a subluxation of the Hock for example? I can assure you that you will be confronted with such conditions often. These are all questions you can ask when you contact an organization offering to help you learn to treat animals.

Just two weeks ago I uploaded my own Website. I guess I needed to get into the 21st century. Please visit my website to get an idea of what is possible: www.kellythompsondc.com . I am currently writing many more articles for the website on this subject so stay tuned. If you have any questions on this subject please feel free to contact me. I have a contact page on my Website.

Kelly Thompson, DC