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March 08, 2007

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[News](#)
[Sports](#)
[Lifestyle](#)
[Event Calendar](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Archives](#)

[Fictitious Business Name Filing](#)

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[Local Weather](#)
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Toni Balfour Blends Chinese Herbs to Treat Dog Ailments

March 07, 2007

Libby Motika , Senior Editor

As with many unexpected discoveries, bright new information is often happened upon by accident. Chinese medicine doctor Toni Balfour's focus on treating canine ailments was no exception.

Balfour, whose Pacific Palisades practice is decidedly people-oriented, was in Florida visiting her parents when the idea occurred to turn her attention to dogs.

'My parents' dog was walking on three legs, so I gave him some Chinese herbs and was surprised how quickly the dog responded,' Balfour says. 'In no time, he was walking on four legs and chasing after raccoons.'

In Balfour's eyes, a three-legged dog may be remarkably agile, but it doesn't have to be so hobbled. She believes that the principles of Chinese medicine apply equally to dogs.

Treating a disease in Chinese medicine means strengthening and protecting normal Qi (chee), which is the life force energy necessary for health and vitality. In ancient China, a physician was only paid while his patient was healthy, not while his patient was ill. The balance of yin and yang is maintained in the whole healthy body because the sum total of the yin and yang will be in a fluctuating balance. Disease develops because normal Qi is unable to resist the onslaught of the pathogenic Qi; if pathogenic Qi overwhelms normal Qi then a functional disturbance of the body results.

The similarities between the physiology of human beings and dogs are closer than we think, Balfour says. 'My goal was interpreting the common things that go on with dogs within a Chinese medicine framework.'

For example, dogs suffer from joint and muscle pain and arthritis as Balfour's parents' dog did. They also have digestive and bladder problems, and the aches and pains associated with old age.

Balfour spent a year researching what she calls wide patterns of disharmony in dogs and developed a line of herbal formulations, Qi Blends for Dogs, that address eight different conditions. She will market them through veterinarians.

Although most people associate Chinese medicine with acupuncture, herb formulas are equally important. 'I love herbs and I like to develop as precise a formula as I can,' Balfour says. 'The formula is based on the underlying problem.'

'For example, there are two patterns that affect skin in dogs: one is flaky, itchy, irritated skin, and the other results in red, pussy skin lesions, what we call wet hot spots.'

'We treat both internally and topically.'

Balfour has developed two different programs to address a broad range of skin conditions.

The 'Skin Repair for Hot Spots, Sores and More' is a liquid tincture ingested, while the topical powder is applied to hot spots, open sores and moist sores. The second program-- 'Skin Soothe'Itch,' both drops and powder--addresses itching with dry skin and flaky skin.

Because animals are likely to lick their skin, Balfour's herbal formulas are food-grade and organic. They contain no sulphur, preservatives or chemicals, and are mixed with filtered water. She purchases the herbs from a company in Northern California that has the Federal GMP certification. She makes her own tinctures and powders then seals and bottles them ready for shipping.

About 300 common herbs are used in day-to-day prescriptions, Balfour says. Some are used to clear heat, others to extinguish wind and others to nourish the blood.

While the layman may not understand the vocabulary, the principle remains the same: the body is healthy when the Qi is in balance.

Balfour views dogs as she would any patient, and while she says that she's not home enough to own a dog right now, she advises families to treat their pets as part of the household. 'Dogs suffer from anxiety, which may be caused by the stress of being left alone too long or from disharmony in the home.'

'My goal is to give vets another option for treating dogs. I have a list of holistic vets, but I am thinking that mainstream vets may be equally interested, so I will approach both.'

Balfour is a California-licensed acupuncturist and herbalist who has practiced in the Palisades for the last six years. She holds a master's degree in Traditional Chinese Medicine from Yo San University.

While a confident practitioner, Balfour admits that the transition from being an herbalist to becoming a businessperson has been the most challenging aspect of the new venture. 'Turning an idea into a reality involves taking risks financially and being more business-minded,' she says.

After working on her formulas for over a year, Balfour put out the word to friends and then friends of friends to find dogs to observe and to test her remedies.

It's great to get feedback,' she says. 'One man gives his dog 'Serenity Blend,' which, he reports, has resulted in calming his dog, but with an added dividend. He says that his dog is addicted to it, stands by the refrigerator and begs for a treat. He gets so excited, that his owner bought six more bottles to have on hand.'

In writing the Qi Blends for Dogs brochure, Balfour tried to maintain a comfort level for her customers. 'I named the blends understandable titles, such as 'Anti-Parasite Blend,' or 'Joint and Muscle Blend.'

'The difference between Western and Eastern medicine is similar to two different kinds of road maps,' she says. 'One may name the landmarks, rivers and streams and main roads, while the other concentrates on primary and secondary roads. But both are correct, both will get you where you want to go.'

For more information on Qi Blends, visit www.qiblends.com.

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^ [TOP](#) ^

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