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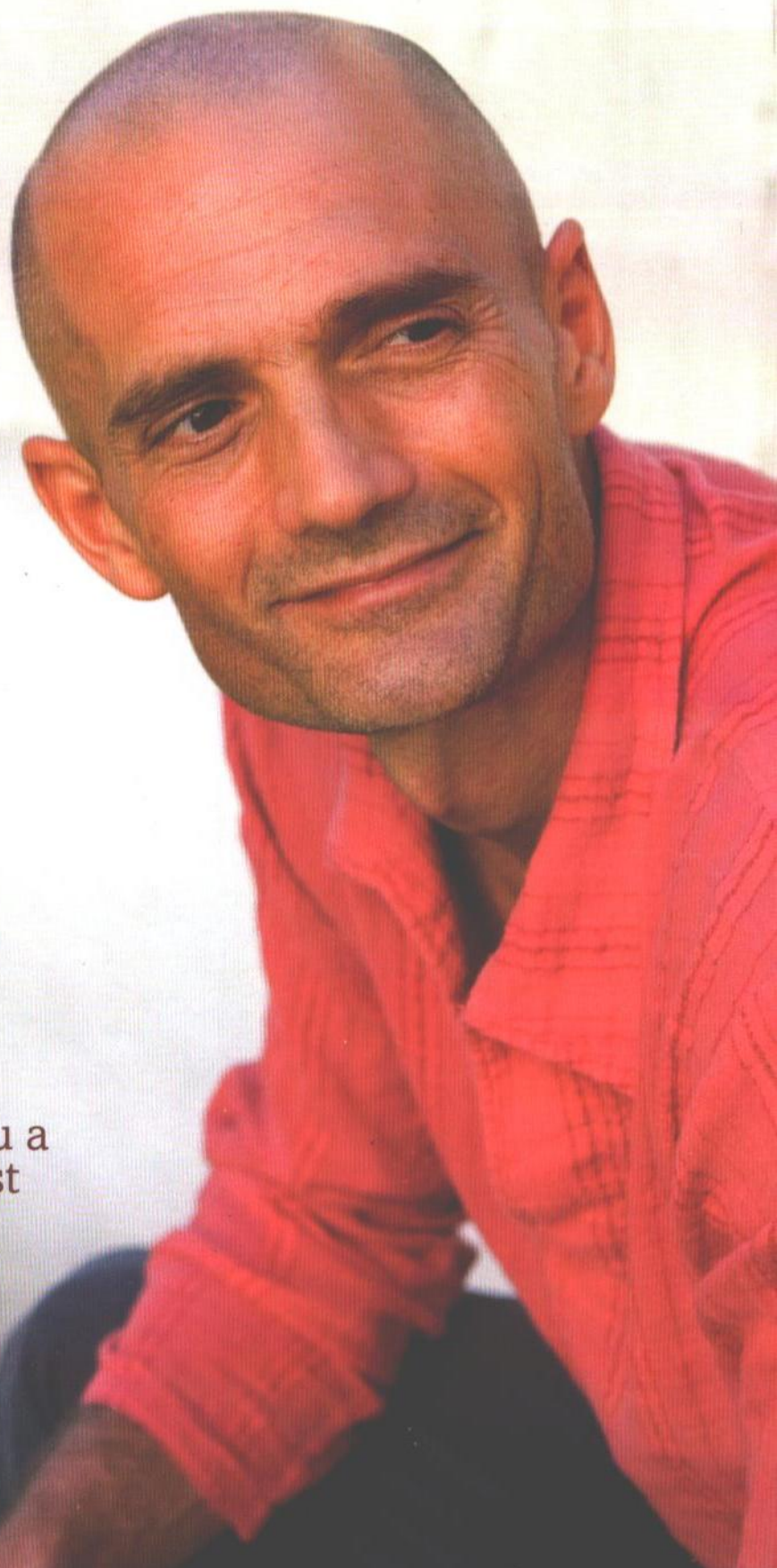
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4- legged clients

**Working with animals
can be emotionally satisfying
& powerful work,
& it could make you
a better therapist ...**

By Karen Gaspers





understanding animal massage laws

The International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork provides a state-by-state overview of animal massage laws on its website, www.iaamb.org/reference/state-laws-2006.html. The list was compiled in 2006, however, and some laws may have already changed. For the most accurate information, it's best to contact your state's massage board or department of health about legal requirements in a specific area.

Bruce Bregenzer, a massage therapist in Beach Park, Illinois, had never met anyone as bad off as Astor. An orphan, Astor had obviously been abused. She was terrified when Bregenzer came to offer massage to the shelter's residents; she trembled and was easily spooked. Working quietly and gently during the course of nine months, Bregenzer was able to help her relax and begin to trust. Gradually her fear disappeared. "Her personality came out as a clown. She began to play with others," Bregenzer says. Eventually she was adopted into a family she adores.

Astor is a testament to the power of massage to transform the lives not only of humans, but of animals, too. That's because Astor is a dog.

Like humans, animals can benefit from massage in terms of relaxation, pain relief and emotional well-being. "A lot of animals have issues that need attention but there aren't

a lot of people doing it," Bregenzer explains. "There's a need for it."

That need began fueling growth in the practice of animal massage more than a decade ago. Although there are no hard statistics on the profession, legislative activity in recent years aimed at regulating animal massage, and a surge in schools, programs and continuing education courses, point to a real trend. Further evidence comes in the form of the Internet: just a few years ago one was hard-pressed to find much information online. Now a search on Google™ for "animal massage" will return more than two million hits.

Animal massage encompasses everything from dogs and cats to ferrets and iguanas to horses and zoo animals. Most therapists, however, spend their time working with dogs, cats and horses, and these animals fall into one of two categories: companion or competition.

Companions or pets receive massages much as the average human would for overall health. Competition or performance animals often receive what is akin to sports massage, receiving pre- and post-event massages to enhance athletic performance much as athletes would. Massage is used on both types to improve recovery from injury or illness, minimize disability, and manage musculoskeletal problems.

Practitioners generally employ the same techniques as those used on humans, only modified to work within the context of animals—their language, their needs, how they respond to touch.

>> article continued on page 113

PHOTO © THERESA GAGNON



take me out to the spa

Spas are a booming business these days and people who like to head to the spa for a little R&R also like to bring their pets with them when they can. Is it too far-fetched to think that spas might start offering massage for animals?

"We may see more spa-type services for dogs," says Theresa Gagnon, director of animal programs at the Bancroft School of Massage Therapy in Massachusetts.

One place that's ahead of the curve is The Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Sarasota, Florida, which launched its "The Privileged Pup" Pet Massage Program in November 2006. Owners choose from one of four massage therapy services for their dog—therapeutic Swedish, full body relaxation, invigorating sports or senior pet. The one-hour massage is performed in the guest's room by one of the six therapists on staff trained

PHOTO © THERESA GAGNON



in animal massage. In addition, the session includes a personalized lesson in pet massage for the owner.

Spa Director Darlene Davison created the program after she saw the benefits of massage first-hand with her own dog. But guests aren't asking for the service yet. Instead, Davison and her staff offer the service to guests who have checked in with their pets. "We try to get every animal that comes here a massage," she says. So far the program works with one to two pets a week.

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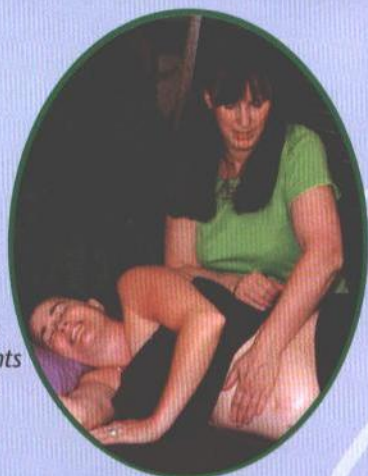
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36% of American households have a dog or cat.

SOURCE: AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Therefore, understanding animal behavior, body language and genetic predispositions becomes extremely important when assessing and treating animals.

“Species respond differently to touch,” says John Rudinger, president and founder of the school of PetMassage in Toledo, Ohio. Cats see themselves as aggressors hunting prey, while horses view themselves as prey, and dogs are somewhere in between, he explains. Actions such as touching the throat can be very intense and threatening for an animal.

In addition, animals can't verbally communicate with the therapist in the same way humans can. “Body language and behavior are the only things we have to let us know how the animal is doing during a massage and how they are feeling about what we are doing,” says Theresa Gagnon, director of animal programs at the Bancroft School of Massage Therapy in Worcester, Massachusetts.

GROWING PAINS

Setting up an animal massage practice isn't straightforward, however. In terms of acceptance from the medical community, awareness of its benefits and the creation of national standards, “animal massage at this point is where human massage was 15 years ago,” says Gagnon. Her goal is to work with other schools and organizations on this issue to set standards for animal massage.

“If we can get some standards, the states will be more willing to allow it or do something with either certification or licensing.”

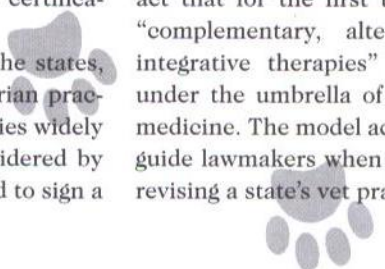
Currently, licensure is the jurisdiction of the states, usually incorporated into the state's veterinarian practice law. What therapists are allowed to do varies widely from state to state. In Illinois, which is considered by many to have the model law, owners only need to sign a

consent form allowing animal massage therapists to work with their animals just as an owner would do with a veterinarian. In other places, such as Maine, massage is restricted to the practice of veterinarians or vet technicians.

Generally speaking, the veterinarian community has not been as helpful as it could be in this matter. When Bregenzler began his practice in 1998, he thought the best approach would be to offer his services to local vets.

“I really like the idea of working with vets. I think that's the way to go because they are the ones who see the injuries, the surgeries, the animals who are getting older,” he says. But Bregenzler was disappointed and confused by the often negative responses to his calls. “We don't compete with them,” he says. “I think we complement each other.”

In 2003, the American Veterinarian Medical Association adopted an updated model veterinarian practice act that for the first time brought “complementary, alternative and integrative therapies” for animals under the umbrella of veterinarian medicine. The model act is meant to guide lawmakers when preparing or revising a state's vet practice law.



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PHOTO © THERESA GAGNON

getting started

Wondering where to turn for instruction in animal massage? Look online for schools, instructors, and organizations. Here are three websites to get you started: www.amtil.com (AMTIL, Inc.), www.iaath.com (The International Alliance of Animal Therapy and Healing), and www.iaamb.org (The International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork).

If adopted whole cloth, only a licensed veterinarian or someone under the direct supervision of a licensed veterinarian could legally provide animal massage—much like saying only a medical doctor could provide massage to humans.

“There is a real drive in the United States for the veterinary community to say [animal massage] is vet medicine even though it’s health and wellness,” says Patricia Whalen-Shaw, founder and president of Integrated Touch Therapy, an animal training facility located in Circleville, Ohio.

However, Whalen-Shaw does believe there is a need for minimum training requirements. “Basic standards should be set up,” she says. “If you don’t have a basic understanding of what muscles do and how they function, then you can’t understand how you can effectively work on them.”

The problem is that no one is working together, says Gagnon. “I think we all need to get together and come up with something” rather than each school or organization trying to forge ahead on its own.

BECOMING AN ANIMAL MASSAGE THERAPIST

Despite the professional growing pains, people are drawn to animal massage because it is emotionally satisfying and powerful work. “It’s incredibly rewarding to see a person so excited that his or her beloved companion is not in pain anymore,” Whalen-Shaw says.

For human therapists, animal massage can enhance their human practice, particularly in the areas of observation and manual assessment. Working with animals means relying heavily on what a therapist sees and hears and feels, which can sharpen the senses and heighten perception. “You really have to listen to them. You have to be 100 percent present, even more so than with humans,” Whalen-Shaw says. “Animals do require single mindedness.”

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Training typically includes anatomy, physiology, biomechanics and massage techniques. Most programs also include animal behavior and handling. Bregenzer and Gagnon both recommend gaining additional experience by working at a shelter. "It gives you a lot of animal handling experience," Gagnon says.

There are differences from human practice of which to be aware. One of the biggest differences is that animals need much less applied pressure than humans. This is something that Bregenzer has seen

human therapists struggle with. "If you are used to doing deep massage, it's going to be harder to adjust," he says. Instead, think infant massage or geriatric massage in which touch is very light.

"It's more about listening to the animal's body," Bregenzer adds. "If you're physically working too hard, you're not doing it right."

Whalen-Shaw sees the same problem with 90 percent of the human massage therapists who go through her program. "You cannot create pain," she says. "You can't say, 'You'll feel better in three days.' A dog lives now. The horse lives now. The cat lives now. They don't get, 'I'll feel better in three days.' They get, 'You're hurting me.' And they have mechanisms to stop you from hurting them."

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And there's another difference—human clients aren't likely to harm you, but an animal may bite, kick or scratch. It's one reason why reading body language is so important.

"Watch for signs," says Bregenzer. It may be very subtle, such as the curl of a lip or the rolling of the eyes. Or it may be tension in the animal's body. At that point, "back away, go somewhere else, make them comfortable, then ask to go back in again," he says. For Bregenzer the asking is in the hands, slowly working back to the area in question.

Bregenzer also believes animals are

much more involved in massage sessions than people. "Humans tend to lay there and let the work be done," he says. "With animals, you can almost feel their attention following your fingers, even with their eyes closed."

The intuitive nature of animals is something animal massage therapists appreciate, and it can compel them to become more intuitive themselves. "You become more perceptive of how animals feel in our presence," says Rudinger. "And you learn to read their behaviors."

As with human clients, it's about building trust. "If I respect them and sit quietly and wait for their acceptance, even if I wasn't able to touch them, that can be the most powerful session we ever have because I've learned to accept their boundaries," says Whalen Shaw. "The next time the animals come in, they will remember that." ■