

Analysis Of The Use Of Alternative Therapies In The Treatment Of Chronic Diseases In Canines

Paola Ximena Becerra Rueda¹

¹Universidad Internacional del Trópico Americano (Unitrópico) Yopal, Casanare, Colombia
paobecerra141819@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1187-7237>

Summary

This article explores the use of alternative therapies in the treatment of chronic diseases in canines, a growing focus in veterinary medicine that seeks to complement conventional treatments and improve animal quality of life. Through a descriptive and exploratory study, the perceptions of veterinarians and pet owners regarding the efficacy and application of therapies such as acupuncture, phytotherapy, homeopathy and laser therapy were analyzed. The results show an increase in the acceptance of these therapeutic approaches, especially in cases of degenerative diseases, chronic pain and immune disorders. It is concluded that, although these therapies do not replace conventional treatments, they can represent an effective complementary strategy when used responsibly and with professional support.

Keywords: integrative veterinary medicine, chronic diseases, complementary therapies, canines, animal welfare.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic diseases in canines represent one of the greatest challenges in contemporary veterinary clinical practice. As the life expectancy of companion animals has increased, so has the incidence of chronic pathologies such as osteoarthritis, kidney failure, autoimmune diseases, hypothyroidism, idiopathic epilepsy, and certain types of cancer (Moore et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). These conditions, due to their prolonged and degenerative nature, require continuous and often complex treatments, which not only seek to control the disease, but also improve the quality of life of the animal.

Conventional treatments, based on modern pharmacology, have proven to be effective in many cases; however, they are not exempt from side effects such as liver toxicity, analgesic dependence, or development of drug tolerance (da Silva et al., 2022). This has led many professionals and pet owners to explore complementary therapeutic approaches, aimed at offering more natural, less invasive alternatives focused on the patient's holistic well-being (Yin et al., 2023).

In this context, integrative veterinary medicine has emerged strongly, an approach that combines the best of traditional medicine with evidence-based alternative therapies. Within this spectrum, practices such as acupuncture, phytotherapy, homeopathy, low-level laser therapy (LLLT), aromatherapy, and manual therapy (osteopathy or chiropractic) have become popular in many veterinary clinics around the world, especially in countries in North America, Europe, and recently in Latin America (Litscher et al., 2021; Bohm et al., 2023).

Various clinical studies have reported that these therapies can be effective for the management of chronic pain, inflammation, stress, and even to improve the immune response in geriatric animals or those with complex underlying diseases (Kwon et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2021). For example, acupuncture has shown benefits in patients with hip dysplasia or partial paralysis, while phytotherapy has been successfully used as an adjuvant in liver and kidney treatments (Yin et al., 2023).

Despite these advances, there is still a significant gap between the growing use of these therapies and the scientific evidence that supports their systematic implementation. The lack of standardization in protocols, the lack of formal academic training in alternative veterinary medicine, and the perception of these therapies as "unscientific" by some professionals, constitute obstacles to their definitive integration into clinical practice (Witt et al., 2020).

Therefore, this article aims to analyze the current use of alternative therapies in the treatment of chronic diseases in canines, evaluating their degree of acceptance among veterinarians, their perception of efficacy, and the main barriers and opportunities for their formal incorporation into comprehensive veterinary therapeutic plans.

Theoretical Framework

Integrative veterinary medicine has gained increasing interest in recent decades as a response to the limitations of conventional treatments in the management of chronic diseases. This approach combines traditional therapies with alternative methods that seek to care for the patient in a comprehensive way, not only physically, but also emotionally and environmentally (Moore et al., 2021).

1. Fundamentals of alternative therapies in veterinary medicine

Alternative therapies in veterinary medicine are based on ancestral principles and practices of natural medicine, many of them with origins in traditional Chinese, Ayurvedic, and European herbal medicine (Yin et al., 2023). Although for years they were considered marginal practices, today they are the subject of scientific research and supervised clinical application, especially in patients with degenerative, oncological, and neurological diseases (da Silva et al., 2022).

Among the main therapies used in canines are:

Table 1. Main alternative therapies in canines and their level of evidence (own elaboration based on current literature).

Alternative therapy	Therapeutic basis	Main clinical uses in canines	Level of evidence
Acupuncture	Stimulation of energy points	Chronic pain, hip dysplasia, epilepsy	Moderate-High (Kwon et al., 2020)
Phytotherapy	Use of botanical extracts	Hepatic, renal, dermatological diseases	Moderate (Yin et al., 2023)
Homeopathy	Dilution of active ingredients	Anxiety, dermatitis, mild digestive	Low-Moderate (Witt et al., 2020)
Low-level laser	Photobiomodulation of tissues	Arthritis, trauma, post-surgical recovery	Alto (da Silva et al., 2022)
Aromatherapy	Using Essential Oils	Stress, anxiety, immune stimulation	Low-Moderate (Bohm et al., 2023)

2. Clinical application in chronic diseases

Chronic diseases in canines, such as osteoarthritis, chronic kidney failure, and some types of cancer, affect the patient's quality of life and require sustained treatments. In many cases, conventional therapies have adverse effects, long-term loss of efficacy, or resistance of the body to treatment (Smith et al., 2021).

2.1. Acupuncture

Acupuncture has shown benefits in modulating pain, stimulating the nervous system, and regulating the immune system. Studies in canine models have documented significant improvements in mobility and pain reduction without the exclusive use of anti-inflammatories (Kwon et al., 2020). In addition, it has been used in the treatment of partial paralysis, muscle dysfunctions and postoperative recovery.

2.2. Phytotherapy

Phytotherapy offers a less invasive alternative with antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and hepatoprotective effects. Plants such as milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*), devil's claw, and turmeric have been widely studied in veterinary medicine for their effects on the liver, joints, and digestive system (Yin et al., 2023).

2.3. Low-Level Laser Therapy (LLLT)

Laser therapy has shown efficacy in tissue regeneration, pain control, and scarring. Its use has expanded in clinics specializing in orthopedics and animal rehabilitation. Controlled studies have shown a reduction in joint pain and an improvement in gait in patients with canine osteoarthritis (da Silva et al., 2022).

Table 2. Clinical applications of alternative therapies in chronic canine diseases.

Chronic pathology	Alternative therapies applied	Observed Clinical Results
Osteoarthritis	Acupuncture, LLLT, Herbal Therapy	Improved mobility, reduced pain (Moore et al., 2021)
Chronic kidney failure	Phytotherapy (diuretic, hepatoprotective extracts)	Symptom control, stabilization of functions (Yin et al., 2023)
Cancer	Acupuncture, aromatherapy, natural diet	Stress reduction, appetite improvement (Bohm et al., 2023)

Chronic anxiety	Homeopathy, aromatherapy	Decreased clinical signs of stress (Witt et al., 2020)
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3. Limitations and Disputes

Despite their expansion, alternative therapies still face criticism due to lack of standardization, little formal academic training, and variability in the quality of the products used. Researchers such as Witt et al. (2020) point out that many studies in homeopathy lack rigorous controls, which makes it difficult to scientifically validate their effects.

In addition, there are concerns about the unsupervised use of these therapies by owners without medical training, which could put the animal's health at risk. Therefore, the need for these therapies to be prescribed and applied only by trained veterinarians is insisted on (Moore et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a **mixed approach with a descriptive and exploratory design**, with the aim of analyzing the use of alternative therapies in the treatment of chronic diseases in canines from the perspective of veterinary professionals and pet owners. This methodological choice responded to the need to collect both quantifiable information and subjective perceptions about the efficacy, frequency, and acceptance of such therapies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

1. Research Design

A non-experimental design was chosen, since independent variables were not manipulated, but existing phenomena were observed in their natural context. The research combined two data collection instruments:

- Structured (quantitative) surveys
- Semi-structured (qualitative) interviews

Table 1. Variables, instruments and scales used in the study (own elaboration).

Variable	Guy	Measuring instrument	Scale
Frequency of use of therapies	Quantitative	Structured survey	5 pts Likert scale
Perception of efficacy	Quantitative	Structured survey	5 pts Likert scale
Opinion on Enforcement Barriers	Qualitative	Semi-structured interview	Question Guide
Level of training in therapies	Quantitative	Structured survey	Nominal scale

2. Population and sample

The study population consisted of:

- **Veterinary clinicians** with at least 5 years' experience in small animal medicine.
- **Owners of canines** with diagnosed chronic diseases (minimum 6 months of evolution).

Purposive sampling was applied to select key informants in three Latin American countries: Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico.

Table 2. Inclusion criteria and sample size.

Group	Inclusion criteria	N
Clinical veterinarians	Bachelor's degree in veterinary medicine, 5+ years of experience, use of integrative therapies	40
Owners	Canine owners with a medical diagnosis of chronic disease and experience with therapies	30

3. Data collection instruments

3.1. Survey of veterinarians

A 20-item digital survey was designed, organized into four sections: general data, frequency of use of alternative therapies, perception of effectiveness, and barriers to their application. Content validity was reviewed by three experts in integrative veterinary medicine and quantitative methods (Moore et al., 2021).

3.2. Owner interviews

A semi-structured guide was developed with open questions about personal experience, perception of the animal's health status before and after treatment, motivations for choosing alternative therapies and future expectations. The interviews were conducted by video call and recorded with informed consent.

4. Ethical procedures

The study complied with the ethical principles of animal research established by the **World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA, 2020)**. All participants signed an informed consent form and the confidentiality of the data was guaranteed. No experimental treatments were applied and no existing therapeutic plans were altered.

5. Data analysis

5.1. Quantitative data

The data from the surveys were processed using **descriptive statistics**, using frequencies, percentages and measures of central tendency. SPSS v.27 software was used to organize and analyze the information.

5.2. Qualitative data

The interviews were transcribed and manually coded through the **thematic analysis method** (Braun & Clarke, 2021), identifying recurring patterns and emerging categories associated with the use of therapies, perceived effects, and barriers to access.

6. Additional methodological considerations

Table 3. Methodological work schedule.

Stage	Activity	Duration
Instrument Design and Validation	Preparation, review and pilot testing	3 weeks
Data collection	Application of surveys and interviews	8 weeks (January-March 2025)
Analysis and triangulation	Statistical processing and thematic analysis	4 weeks

RESULTS

The results of this study allow us to understand the degree of adoption, perception of effectiveness, implementation barriers and type of pathologies addressed by alternative therapies in veterinary medicine applied to canines with chronic diseases.

1. Frequency of use of alternative therapies

Of the **40 veterinarians surveyed**, **75%** ($n=30$) indicated that they have used at least one form of alternative therapy in their clinical practice during the last year. The most frequently applied therapy was **acupuncture (67.5%)**, followed by **phytotherapy (55%)**, **low-level laser therapy (42.5%)** and **homeopathy (27.5%)**.

Table 1. Frequency of application of alternative therapies by type (N=40).

Alternative therapy	Number of veterinarians applying it	Percentage (%)
Acupuncture	27	67.5
Phytotherapy	22	55.0
Low-level laser	17	42.5
Homeopathy	11	27.5
Aromatherapy	6	15.0

These results are consistent with previous studies that highlight the preponderant role of acupuncture and phytotherapy as common interventions in integrative veterinary medicine (Kwon et al., 2020; Yin et al., 2023).

2. Chronic diseases treated with alternative therapies

Veterinarians identified multiple chronic diseases as candidates for complementary therapies. The most common were **osteoarthritis (85%)**, **hip dysplasia (60%)**, **chronic neurological disorders (40%)**, and **cancer (25%)**.

Table 2. Main chronic pathologies treated with alternative therapies (N=40).

Pathology treated	Veterinarians who treated her with alternative therapies	Percentage (%)
Osteoarthritis	34	85.0
Hip dysplasia	24	60.0

Chronic disorders	neurological	16	40.0
Cancer		10	25.0
Chronic anxiety		8	20.0

This pattern reflects the palliative and pain control approach that these therapies provide, especially in geriatric patients, as noted by Moore et al. (2021) and da Silva et al. (2022).

3. Perception of effectiveness by veterinarians

90% of veterinarians stated that alternative therapies were moderately to highly effective as an adjunct to traditional treatment. 70 % considered that they reduced pharmacological dependence, while 62.5% reported an improvement in the patient's quality of life .

Table 3. Clinical perceptions on the effectiveness of complementary therapies.

Perception category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improved pain control	32	80.0
Reduced use of anti-inflammatories	28	70.0
Improvement in overall mobility	25	62.5
Improvement in the patient's emotional state	21	52.5
No significant changes	3	7.5

The findings align with research reporting that multimodal treatment improves clinical outcomes in dogs with chronic pain (Bohm et al., 2023; Litscher et al., 2021).

4. Results from the owners' perspective

In the 30 interviews with owners, 86.6% (n=26) reported an improvement in their pets' quality of life after the initiation of alternative therapies. The most mentioned effects were:

- Increase in energy and mobility (73.3%)
- Improved appetite (53.3%)
- Decreased stress (43.3%)
- Reduced need for traditional medication (40.0%)

In addition, 30% said they were willing to continue exclusively with integrative treatments as long as they are supervised by a veterinary professional.

5. Barriers to implementation

The main obstacles identified for the implementation of alternative therapies in clinical practice were:

- Lack of specific training (62.5%)
- Absence of regulation and standardized protocols (50%)
- Additional costs to the owner (42.5%)
- Lack of specialized equipment or products (40%)

These barriers reflect the need for greater professionalization of the field, as also noted by Witt et al. (2020) in their reviews on homeopathy and other unconventional methods.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study evidenced a growing and significant trend in the use of alternative therapies in the treatment of chronic diseases in canines, reflecting a paradigm shift towards a more integrative veterinary medicine focused on animal welfare. Practices such as acupuncture, phytotherapy, and low-level laser therapy (LLLT) were the most widely used, both for their proven clinical efficacy and for the growing acceptance among pet owners (Moore et al., 2021; da Silva et al., 2022).

The data obtained allow us to conclude that these therapies, when applied by trained professionals and in a complementary way to conventional treatment, can generate substantial improvements in the quality of life of animals, especially in cases of musculoskeletal, neurological and chronic degenerative diseases. This finding aligns with recent research highlighting the benefits of a multimodal therapeutic approach in veterinary medicine (Bohm et al., 2023; Kwon et al., 2020).

From the owners' perspective, alternative therapies were valued for their ability to reduce pain, improve appetite, decrease stress, and promote an overall state of well-being in their pets. These perceptions underscore the importance of considering the emotional component of the human-animal bond in the design of sustainable and empathetic therapeutic strategies (Yin et al., 2023).

However, relevant limitations were also identified. The **lack of standardization of clinical protocols**, the **lack of formal academic training** in alternative therapies, and the **absence of specific regulation** in several Latin American countries represent significant obstacles to their implementation on a larger scale (Witt et al., 2020). Likewise, the **variability in the quality of the botanicals** or equipment used, as well as the **lack of large-scale controlled clinical studies**, hinder the scientific consolidation of these therapies.

Consequently, it is recommended:

1. **Strengthen academic training** in integrative veterinary medicine, through postgraduate courses, diplomas and accredited certifications.
2. **To promote rigorous clinical research** that allows scientific validation of the efficacy, dose, duration and possible interactions of alternative therapies in canine patients with chronic diseases.
3. **Promote professional and health regulation** that guarantees quality, safety and ethical responsibility in the use of complementary products and devices.
4. **Promote effective communication** between veterinarians and owners, based on evidence and mutual respect, for shared decision-making in the treatment of chronic patients.

In summary, alternative therapies should not be considered as a substitute for conventional medicine, but as a complementary tool that, integrated with clinical criteria and under scientific foundations, can contribute to a more humanized, effective and ethical veterinary care.

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