

The role of Osteopathy in the Companion Dog :
An evidence-informed discussion of how Osteopathy
can benefit the companion dog, and why owners should
consider it as part of supportive care

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the family pet is increasingly seen as a family member, with greater spending on advanced veterinary treatments to extend their pets' lifespan and quality of life. This is leading to the increased incidence of age-related illness, chronic diseases and musculoskeletal conditions that demand more care, treatment and medical management. (Epstein et al., 2015; Belshaw et al., 2018).

Wear and tear conditions such as osteoarthritis, degenerative joint disease, spinal cord injury and disc disease, along with congenital conditions such as hip and elbow dysplasia, contribute to chronic pain and loss of mobility in dogs. Behaviour, activity levels and quality of life can be significantly impacted by these conditions. (Griffin and Polydorou, 2015) Often, owners under-recognise the signs of pain as dogs mask and adapt their activities as they continue to function despite the discomfort, leading to delayed or absent management of the disease condition. (Hielm-Björkman et al., 2011)

Traditional veterinary care and management, utilising pharmacology, surgery, and physical therapy, play a crucial role in the diagnosis and management of musculoskeletal dysfunction. (Millis and Levine, 2014). However, there has been increasing interest in complementary therapies to manage these conditions. Chiropractic, massage and acupuncture are becoming more

widespread, with interest in Osteopathy growing. The manual practice of Osteopathy is increasingly recognised in supporting the body with functional movement, reducing compensatory strain, pain levels and distress.

The practice of Osteopathy is based on the principle that bodily systems are interconnected. The core principles state that a) the body is a unit, b) the body is capable of self-healing, c) structure and function are reciprocally interrelated, and d) rational treatment is based on these understandings. The osteopath uses their hands to assess and treat dysfunction in the body and reestablish proper function to the system, thus allowing the body's own healing potential to restore health and balance. (Musso, A., 2025) The emphasis is on mobility, tissue tone and integrity, and the body's reserves for healing. In veterinary medicine, the principles of osteopathy are applied to assess and treat dysfunction resulting from musculoskeletal imbalances and restrictions.

Limited evidence from veterinary osteopathy and research on rehabilitation and manual therapy demonstrates positive outcomes for the treatment of pain and dysfunction, mobility improvement, and improved functioning. (Millis and Levine, 2014; Bockstahler et al., 2017). More research is needed to fully understand this treatment type in animals, and caution is warranted in interpreting the findings, as some of this research is of poor quality in its study design and treatment approaches.

The aim of this paper is to use an evidence-based approach to explore the role of animal osteopathy in supporting and fostering the health and mobility of the companion dog. This paper will explore the benefits of veterinary osteopathy for mobility, pain, and quality of life within a multi-disciplinary framework.

It must be stated that the author does not advocate for osteopathy as a replacement for veterinary care, but as a supplement to standard care to enhance the welfare and quality of life of the companion dog in cooperation with veterinary diagnosis and treatment.

Background: Musculoskeletal Health in the Companion Dog

The health of the musculoskeletal system is key to the quality of life for dogs, in relation to mobility and well-being. The primary role of this system is structural support, movement, and the performance of activities of daily living, such as walking, running, and playing. When dysfunction is present, not only is this system compromised, but so are the behavioural, social, and psychological systems.

The most common condition affecting the musculoskeletal system in companion dogs is osteoarthritis (OA). With improvements in veterinary care, dogs' lifespans have increased, and with them, the incidence of chronic diseases such as osteoarthritis has risen. Osteoarthritis is a complex progressive disease of the entire joint capsule, which includes bones, cartilage, ligaments, and joint lining in load-bearing joints caused by degeneration of these structures, leading to inflammation, cartilage and bony destruction, prevalent in older dogs. However, young animals can experience early onset OA due to developmental diseases such as elbow and hip dysplasia, osteochondritis dissecans (OCD), patellar luxation and trauma such as cruciate ligament injury or overuse, iliopsoas injury, growth plate fracture and repetitive strain injuries from activities such as frisbee playing. (Johnston, 1997; Anderson et al., 2018). Orthopaedic disease also encompasses musculoskeletal dysfunction. Discomfort and impaired function may arise from soft-tissue and repetitive-strain injuries, poor movement patterns, and compensatory patterns. Dog sports such as flyball, agility, dock diving, hunting, or simply repetitive ball

throwing also predispose dogs to cumulative strain injuries. As well, the excessive mechanical stress on joints and supporting tissues caused by obesity and sedentary lifestyles increases the likelihood of dysfunction and pain (Marshall et al., 2010).

Recognising pain is a significant challenge in canine musculoskeletal health. Unfortunately, dogs cannot verbalise pain as humans do, so caregivers need to interpret their subtle behavioural and movement changes. Often these changes are attributed to normal ageing, personality changes or new quirks. These signs may include difficulty rising, hesitation when jumping, skipping steps on stairs, altered gait patterns, distorted posture, irritation, and social withdrawal. (Belshaw et al., 2018). Consequently, long periods may go by before recognition and intervention are sought.

Compensatory movement patterns often develop when pain or dysfunction is present. This occurs when pain is unrelieved, and the animal must alter its gait or posture to reduce the strain on the structure. Initially, these changes are protective; however, they place other structures under abnormal loads, which changes the muscles, fascia, and even bony structures locally and in distant parts of the body. For example, a dog with a cruciate (knee) injury will shift more weight onto the other hind limb, causing extra strain on the “good” leg, pelvis, and spine as the dog places the leg more underneath itself and has to shift the spine out of alignment (Bocksthaler, B.A. 2013). This increases the strain in the leg, and this compensatory pattern will be responsible for widespread dysfunction up to the ribcage, shoulders, neck and head. In time, these patterns may become ingrained and contribute to gait alterations, reduced movement, and pain.

Movement is only one area of dysfunction seen in musculoskeletal issues. When movement is reduced, physical activity may be limited, leading to obesity, muscle loss, decreased

cardiovascular fitness and isolation. Dogs in discomfort may decrease their social interactions due to pain. Behavioural changes can also be associated with chronic pain, such as anxiety, irritability, and reduced quality of life. (Wiseman-Orr et al., 2004). Given the significant impact of musculoskeletal dysfunction on the welfare of companion dogs, effective strategies are necessary.

Within total canine healthcare, osteopathic intervention may provide support by addressing and treating movement restrictions, compensatory patterns, and functional limitations. However, before the benefits can be explored, an understanding of osteopathic principles and their application to companion animals is necessary.

Osteopathy: Principles and Application in the Companion Dog

The manual therapy of osteopathy was developed by Dr Andrew Taylor Still in the late 19th century based on the principle that structure and function are essentially related. Osteopathy proposes that, for optimal health, the body must be able to move efficiently, adapt to stress both outside and within the body, and maintain its natural balance. Initially, the practice of osteopathy was developed for human patients; these principles have been applied to animals, including companion dogs, to support and treat musculoskeletal function and well-being (Musso, A., 2025).

The concept that the body functions as a complete unit is central to the osteopathic philosophy. Instead of viewing individual body structures in isolation, osteopathy considers the relationship between bones, joints, muscles, fascia, nerves, blood vessels, and all other tissues. Altered bodily function in one area can lead to disruptions in biomechanics, movement, compensatory patterns, or changes in tissue function. (Ceritelli, F., et al., 2022) Compensation often develops slowly, and

a whole-body approach is important in canine patients, where issues may develop over time and involve multiple regions and bodily systems.

The relationship between structure and function is another basic principle in osteopathy. The restoration of movement helps support and improve the normal bodily functions according to the osteopathic philosophy. Injury, repetitive strain, poor posture, obesity, surgery, compensatory adaptations and old age may lead to restricted movement in companion dogs. These restrictions may affect joints, muscles, fascia, or other soft tissues and can contribute to altered gait patterns and reduced physical performance.

Initial assessment in animal osteopathy begins with a thorough health history and observation of the animal's posture and movement. Dynamic gait analysis can bring to light compensatory issues such as asymmetries, weight-shifting and other behaviours that reveal areas of dysfunction. Hands-on examination can reveal areas of tension, heat or coldness, tissue quality, tenderness, and joint mobility. This process assists osteopaths in identifying restrictions that may be contributing to impaired function and discomfort.

Depending on the training school and experience of the osteopath, treatment applications and techniques may vary, but the primary goal of the practitioner is to improve mobility and reduce tissue tension and restriction. The treatment is gentle and can involve soft-tissue techniques, joint mobilisation, myofascial techniques, cranial sacral work and other manual techniques. The goal is not to simply address the single symptom, but to consider how the entire body is functioning as a complete unit.

In both human and animal medical practice, the fascial tissues are receiving increasing attention and research. Fascia forms a continuous network of tissues throughout the body, playing an

important role in the transmission of force, coordination of movement and packaging and protecting muscles and vital structures such as nerves, arteries and veins. Altered movement patterns and compensations within fascial tissues have been proposed as potential contributors to dysfunction (Schleip et al., 2012). Techniques intended to improve fascial mobility and tissue adaptability are the mainstay of many osteopathic systems.

Recent models of osteopathic therapy suggest that treatment may influence neurological and bodily processes, as well as have mechanical effects. Current theories propose that manual techniques may affect sensory input, pain control pathways, autonomic nervous system activity, and movement perception (Bialosky et al., 2009). The observed benefits associated with osteopathic therapy may be explained by these factors.

Osteopathy is considered a complementary therapy rather than a replacement for standard veterinary care. Along with standard veterinary medicine and surgery, physiotherapy, rehabilitation, weight management, and exercise modification, osteopathy can be a beneficial approach within the multidisciplinary team.

When evaluating the potential role of osteopathy in companion dogs, the principles of osteopathy must be understood. These principles allow for the theoretical application of this method; the question remains whether they translate into practical benefits for dogs. The following evaluation examines the potential of osteopathy to reduce pain, improve mobility, enhance quality of life and support overall health in the companion dog.

Potential Benefits of Osteopathy in the Companion Dog

The goal of osteopathy is to support and improve physical function through the identification and treatment of movement restrictions, tissue imbalance and biomechanical dysfunction. While specific research in veterinary osteopathy is limited, evidence from veterinary rehabilitation, manual therapy research, and clinical practice suggests that osteopathic treatment may be effective in providing several benefits, such as pain management, mobility, functional performance, and overall quality of life. These potential benefits are explored below.

Pain Reduction and Improved Comfort

The most significant factor affecting canine welfare is pain (Malkani et al., 2024). Chronic pain in companion dogs can arise from common sources such as osteoarthritis, soft tissue injury, degenerative joint disease, and compensatory strain patterns. Pain affects not only movement but also behaviour, appetite, sleep, social interaction and play.

Osteopathy may benefit dogs by reducing musculoskeletal pain and dysfunction. Practitioners seek to identify areas of tissue restriction, compensation, and improper loading contributing to pain and dysfunction. This is accomplished by manual assessment and osteopathic manipulation. The treatment seeks to alleviate the mechanical stress placed on the body by improving mobility and reducing and rebalancing excessive muscular tension.

Current pain literature suggests that manual therapy, such as osteopathy, may also have effects on the nervous system activity. Pressure sensors in the tissues are believed to be stimulated by manual techniques, thus influencing pain signalling pathways in human models, and may provide a theoretical basis for positive effects on animal patients as well. (Bialosky et al., 2009). In the real world, owners frequently report that their animals have experienced improvements after manual treatments. Increased willingness to move, reduced signs of pain, and greater relaxation

are among the benefits owners notice. While these observations might be the result of confirmation bias, that is, seeing what one wants to see, they may be indicators of beneficial effects.

Improved Mobility and Movement

Mobility is essential to canine health and quality of life. Dogs are built for efficient movement during exercise, exploration, social interaction, and play within their environment. Because of this, mobility has wide-ranging consequences for physical and mental well-being.

Osteopathic treatment aims to restore normal movement within joints, muscles, fascia, and other soft tissues. With improved mobility, the body can experience a wider range of motion, greater flexibility, and improved movement patterns. When dogs are experiencing chronic stiffness and compensation, osteopathic techniques may reduce asymmetries and improve more balanced weight distribution in movement.

This is especially important for senior dogs, whose mobility affects overall health, and where reduced movement often results in decreased physical activity, reduced cardiovascular fitness, muscle loss, increased weight gain, and progressive decline. Osteopathic treatments can help support mobility, which may help maintain activity levels and independence for longer in elderly dogs.

In active and sporting dogs, improved movement efficiency may also boost athletic performance and reduce the risk of secondary injuries; however, osteopathy should not be considered a stand-alone treatment for appropriate conditioning and training. It can be beneficial for providing optimal physical function (Musso, A. et al., 2025)

Addressing Compensation Patterns

Compensation is a common element of canine musculoskeletal dysfunction. When an animal experiences pain or restriction, they frequently adapt their posture and movement to avoid aggravating that dysfunction. While this protective adaptation may initially be beneficial, these patterns often become stuck and can add to greater stress on other areas of the body. For example, a dog experiencing hindlimb discomfort may transfer greater weight to the forelimbs. Over time, this altered loading pattern may contribute to shoulder tension, cervical discomfort, or changes in spinal mobility. Likewise, restrictions in one joint, like the knee, will alter movement throughout the movement chain.

The core principle of osteopathy is that the body works as a unit, and one area of dysfunction will influence the rest of the body. Therefore, one area of dysfunction will show signs of compromise in other areas, and the symptoms observed may be coming from a distant structure. By assessment and treatment of compensations, more efficient movement and a reduction of strain may be accomplished.

This holistic approach can be valuable in chronic conditions where long-term dysfunction has led to the formation of compensations. While underlying dysfunction may not be eliminated, osteopathy can reduce pain and improve mobility and function.

Bodily health and physical function

One of the proposed benefits of osteopathy is improved tissue health and physical function. The condition of muscles, joints, fascia and connective tissue is an important factor in good health, and osteopathy can foster improvements in circulation, lymphatic drainage, venous flow, nerve transmission and improved nutrient delivery to all bodily tissues and structures.

Tension in tissues can lead to restrictions in movement and altered weight bearing. Osteopathy aims to improve tissue health and mobility by encouraging normal movement within the body. This approach may support circulation and improved exchange of nutrients and metabolic waste products within tissues. (Lee, R.P., 2008)

Within the last two decades, fascial tissues have been receiving increasing attention and scientific study due to their role in the transmission of force in the body, movement coordination and proprioception. Fascia forms a continuous network, bridging distant regions throughout the body. Restrictions within this network may influence movement patterns and tissue function (Schleip et al., 2012). Osteopathic techniques seek to improve fascial flexibility and movement, thereby improving the health and function of the fascia. Although direct studies for this in dogs are limited, it has been demonstrated in laboratory research and can be realistically applied to canines.

Quality of Life, Mental Health and Behaviour

Possibly, the most meaningful outcome for many owners is improvement in their dog's quality of life. Quality of life includes and covers the aspects of physical comfort, mobility, emotional health, social interaction, play, and the ability to perform normal activities.

Chronic pain and restricted movement significantly impact behaviour in companion dogs (R Malikini et al., 2024). Dogs experiencing pain may become less active, less willing to play, and less engaged with their family. Irritability, anxiety, or behavioural changes in the companion dog may not be recognised as pain-related by their owners.

By improving comfort and mobility, osteopathic treatment may positively influence the health and well-being of companion dogs. Owners commonly report increased enthusiasm for walks, improved ability to manage stairs or furniture, and greater willingness to participate in normal activities following treatment. While these observations may lack scientific validation at the moment, they do provide outcomes that are important and beneficial to both owners and patients.

Recently, quality of life has become an increasingly important outcome measure in veterinary medicine, particularly in the management of chronic conditions. Improvements in comfort, mobility, and participation in daily activities should be considered valuable treatment goals even if underlying disease processes can not be fully reversed.

Looking Ahead: The Future of Osteopathy for Dogs

While research into animal osteopathy is still developing, the evidence available so far is encouraging. Studies in rehabilitation, manual therapy and pain science, together with the experiences of practitioners and owners, suggest that improving movement and reducing compensation may have meaningful benefits for many dogs (Bialosky et al., 2009; Millis & Levine, 2014). As interest in complementary therapies continues to grow, so too does the need for more high-quality research focused specifically on canine osteopathy.

Osteopathy should not be viewed as a replacement for veterinary care but as another valuable tool that can work alongside diagnosis, medication, rehabilitation and good management. By taking a whole-body approach and addressing movement restrictions before they become larger problems, osteopathy has the potential to support comfort, mobility and overall well-being.

Although there is still more to learn, the current understanding of biomechanics, compensation patterns and manual therapy provides a strong foundation for its use. With its focus on treating the body as a whole unit and enhancing the self-healing capacity, the removal of restrictions and the process of restoring correct function, osteopathy can contribute to pain reduction, improved tissue health and better quality of life (Musso, A. et al 2025). As further research emerges, it is likely that our knowledge of when and how osteopathy can best help companion dogs will continue to grow, giving owners even more evidence on which to base their decisions.

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