The application of chiropractic to the animal patient started early in the history of the chiropractic profession. B.J. Palmer, recognized as the developer of human chiropractic, wrote in 1944:

"In the early days of chiropractic, we maintained a veterinarian [sic] hospital where we adjusted the vertebral subluxations of sick cows, horses, cats, dogs, etc. We did this to prove to ourselves that the Chiropractic principle and practice did apply. Even today, occasionally, somebody brings us a valuable pedigreed pet to adjust." (1)

Many anecdotal stories exist in early publications, and through oral communications of chiropractors that had treated animals at the request of concerned animal owners. However, no organized educational forums or practice standards existed, other than those devised for application to humans. The chiropractic practice for animals was never a direct focus for the chiropractic profession and, furthermore, was probably seen as an obstacle for the recognition of chiropractic as a human therapy.

In the 1980's, an organization was formed in New Jersey in an attempt to promote the practice of chiropractic, as well as other alternatives, and was called Options for Animals. The group later disbanded when the chiropractor involved faced state charges for practicing on animals. The organization's name was transferred to Sharon L. Willoughby, a veterinarian enrolled at that time at Palmer College of Chiropractic, in an attempt to maintain communication between parties interested in legitimacy and acceptance of animal chiropractic.

In 1985, the First Annual Animal Chiropractic Conference was held at Life College in Georgia. This was the first conference and the last one due to nonsupport of the college administration and pressure from local veterinary interests.

In 1986, an Equine Chiropractic short course for horses was given by Dr. Willoughby in Arkansas. At that meeting, the participants (a mixture of veterinarians and chiropractors) formed the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association (AVCA). Dr. Willoughby was chosen as president and charged initially with developing an educational program for chiropractors and veterinarians. Dr. Willoughby had at that time achieved her degree in chiropractic and was working as Director of the Chiropractic Technology program at Palmer College of Chiropractic, as well as teaching in that program.

The first series of four modules in a 100 hour educational program was started that year. The curriculum was based on interprofessional sharing between the veterinarian and the chiropractor. The primary goal was to enable either professional to understand basic chiropractic theory and technique, to recognize those animals in need of chiropractic care, and then to apply chiropractic therapy to the quadruped.

As the AVCA developed it faced the more difficult mission which was to bring the application of animal chiropractic forward into a recognized discipline. The obstacles were tremendous: no accredited educational curriculum; no practice standards; no research studies; overwhelming opposition from political adversaries in the human chiropractic field and in veterinary medicine; and an plethora of quasi-practitioners with dubious therapies that they labeled chiropractic.

The AVCA has always firmly maintained that the essential partnership of the veterinarian and the chiropractor is integral in animal chiropractic both in education and in practice. Both professionals must have the intensive training required in their respective fields before commencing animal chiropractic training. Recommendations for professional referrals have been standard since the beginning.
The interest and drive to develop animal chiropractic into a discipline was based on the results of applying chiropractic techniques to animals. Although these results may be dismissed as purely anecdotal stories, consistent and positive responses to chiropractic treatments in animal patients encouraged early practitioners to continue in clinical research. The successful application of animal chiropractic by students of the AVCA course, further strengthened the certainty that animal chiropractic deserves a place in the health care arena for animals. Early results could not be dismissed as random occurrences or those able to be achieved only by certain individuals, but instead, that animal chiropractic could be successfully applied after education and training. Through the last decade the public acceptance and demand for chiropractic services has further strengthened the resolve of animal chiropractors to establish a discipline that fills a need in the animal health care field and to provide those services in which the public is assured of relatively consistent, and quality care for their animals.

References:

(1) B.J. Palmer, "It is as Simple as That", Palmer College of Chiropractic, 1944

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