

Physical therapy for pets

Maria Jose Gomez Sanchez and Lynn Cogan are two veterinary nurses who have pursued an alternative, but complimentary, career path in physical therapy and rehabilitation. Together, they run the Animal Rehabilitation Clinic at UCD Veterinary Hospital including the first hydrotherapy unit in Ireland, established in 2006 assisted by sponsorship from Royal Canin, writes Georgina Self



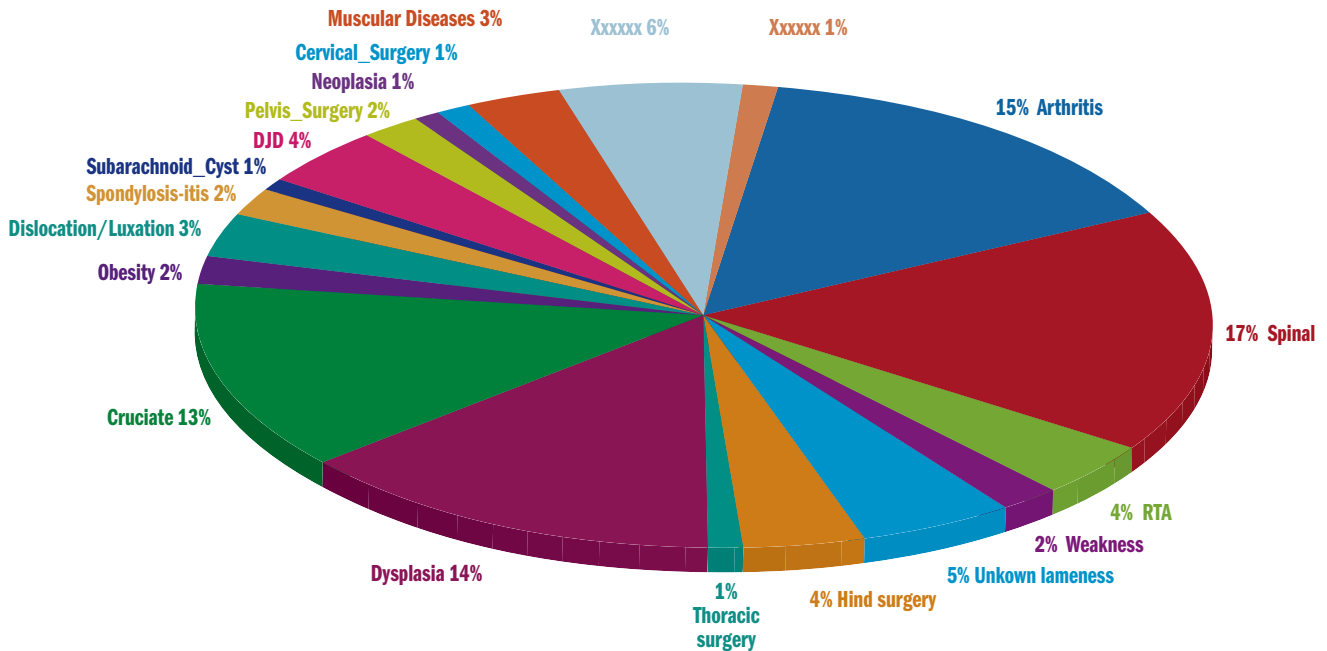
Maria and Lynn are both qualified veterinary nurses, having studied at UCD and working in various disciplines within the hospital. Initially a 'human' physical therapist, Lynn enrolled on the Diploma of Veterinary Nursing course with the view to combining both qualifications, whilst Maria's studies took a more traditional path, after growing up on a farm in her native Spain.

According to Lynn there is no protection of the title 'Animal Physical Therapist' so, legally, anyone can perform therapy. Lynn and Maria both advocate extensive study to be able to provide safe and effective treatment. Both have human physical therapy qualifications, and nursing qualifications. Lynn also has a Certificate in Canine Hydrotherapy and

Maria is studying for a Certificate in Equine Rehabilitation with the Animal Rehabilitation Institute, in Florida.

Both Maria and Lynn suffered from back problems themselves and received help from physical therapy. Lynn had suggested to various clinicians about the merits of providing a service to animals during her time at UCD and also used her previous training to provide therapy to the hospital's in-patients.

The service continues to grow, offering a variety of physical therapy techniques, including hydrotherapy, massage, therapeutic exercises and exercise prescription, using a wide range of specialised equipment. It is also hoped to expand the service to equine patients.



Every patient has a specific and tailored treatment plan reached after a full clinical exam, a physical therapy exam to assess range of motion, muscle hypertrophy or atrophy, neurological function etc. and a discussion of the history and diagnosis. All cases are referred from the hospital or general practice and no first-opinion work is undertaken.

The most common problems presented are hip and elbow dysplasia, osteoarthritis and spinal problems plus post operative therapy for cruciate ligament repair, FHO and total hip replacement but as the pie chart illustrates the caseload is varied, according to Maria.

Treatments on offer include hydrotherapy, massage, therapeutic passive movements, trigger point therapy, thermotherapy, muscle energy techniques and proprioception education. Where appropriate, owners will also be prescribed and trained in techniques they can use at home between visits.

Both Lynn and Maria say there are too many memorable cases to choose from but talk enthusiastically about 'Fluffy', a six-month-old kitten, who was admitted to UCD Veterinary Hospital VH following an unknown trauma. He had a humeral fracture and hind limb paralysis with no deep pain sensation. He was very malnourished, had nasal and ocular discharge as well as mouth and tongue ulceration. Despite having a very poor prognosis, his owner asked that everything possible be done to help Fluffy. Once stabilised, Fluffy underwent various investigations including an MRI which revealed a focal myelopathy at T13. At this point, he was referred to Maria and Lynn in the ARC. In total Fluffy spent five weeks with them undergoing intensive physical therapy and medical care.

After a slow start he began to make daily progress. His deep pain sensation returned and gradually his voluntary motor function and he was walking, though still a little ataxic, by

the time of his discharge. According to Lynn and Maria, he was a special little patient who taught many people not to underestimate the body's ability to heal if given time and appropriate care.

Polly is also well remembered by the duo. The seven-year-old springer spaniel suffers from bilateral hip dysplasia, right luxating patella and left cranial cruciate ligament disease. Due to concurrent medical issues, her owner was reluctant for Polly to undergo surgery to stabilise her left stifle, so Polly was referred to the ARC. After performing a thorough assessment they devised a rehabilitation plan for Polly to strengthen and build her muscles to support her stifle and hip joints, to treat hypertonic and hypotonic muscle groups and to relieve areas of secondary muscle pain. This included massage, trigger point treatment, thermotherapy and hydrotherapy. They also devised a detailed home treatment plan which included massage, thermotherapy and active/active assisted exercises ensuring her owner was comfortable and capable of carrying out each appropriately. Polly is now back hill walking and swimming and is full of life. On a recent veterinary check-up she displayed no signs of pain on cranial drawer or hip extension. Both Lynn and Maria feel this demonstrates that by combining conventional veterinary treatment with physical therapy and owner compliance we can work together to provide the best all round care for our patients.

According to Lynn and Maria, any Irish nurse aspiring to become a physical therapist need to invest in training. There are a variety of short courses on offer to give you an idea of what's involved, they say, but a combination of education in human physical therapy and veterinary medicine is essential to be able to understand anatomy, physiology of muscular and neurological systems, biomechanics and to learn tests and techniques.