

An Article by Practicing Veterinarian, Dr. Clinton Balok

## Velvet Antler for Pets: Myth or Reality

I awoke in the middle of the night with a start. It was mid-December and I was sweating. "What in the world are you doing?" I asked myself. You are actually going to try to convince people that eating the antlers of a bull elk is going to make them feel better. I made myself some hot chocolate and sat down in the living room so I wouldn't wake up the whole house. As I pondered the elk business and the velvet industry in particular, I scratched the ears of my old Labrador, Chip. Chip was twelve years old and could barely move. Age and an active life were taking a toll on him. If only I could give him some medication for his deteriorating hips and elbows that would provide him with some relief and not destroy his liver and kidneys.

As a practicing veterinarian, I have watched thousands of dogs, cats and horses suffer from the crippling effects of osteoarthritis. This is a condition of the joints similar to the condition millions of people deal with daily. The production cartilaginous surfaces of the joints begin to erode and wear away. When this occurs, bone begins rubbing on bone and the pain can be excruciating. As this process progresses, the body attempts to heal the insulted joints by sending calcium to repair the damaged bone. These abnormal bone deposits deform the normal joints even more and increase the pain and discomfort of day-to-day activity.

I studied the literature on elk velvet and the claims made by people of many countries. As I researched the product, it seemed to me that it could cure most ailments, had no side effects and was perfectly natural. To say I was a doubting Thomas was an understatement. I knew many people in the elk business, and I knew the demand for velvet antler by the Koreans had fueled the fire of a burgeoning new livestock industry. The little voice in my head kept saying, "Ostrich, emus, exotic cattle." *Can this product produce the effects claimed in the literature? Can this product produce any of these effects? What can I do to prove to myself that this is not snake oil or smoke and mirrors?*

As I visited with elk breeders on both sides of the Canadian border, it became apparent to me that the velvet industry in North America was indeed a lucrative but very fragile business. The industry was totally dependent upon the whims of the Asian market, primarily Korea. A North American market for velvet antler products needed to be developed and encouraged. To satisfy my skepticism, I had to see proof beyond a reasonable doubt that we were promoting a product that had more than a mystical, psychological effect – an effect or effects which could be reproduced in trials around the world.

I scratched Chip's ears and looked at my old faithful friend. "If this product could improve Chip's quality of life, it would be tremendous," I mused. Also, a dog could not be convinced he was going to feel better. He would either show an improvement, or he wouldn't. It seemed very straightforward to me. Animals could be used to test the efficacy of the product, and the response of the animal to the treatment regimen could be qualitatively evaluated. Probably not a very scientific experiment, but certainly one that would produce some answers to the questions I had.

I bounced my idea off of some friends of mine in the industry, and I was strongly encouraged to initiate a study. I talked with several veterinarians and asked if they would like to participate, but I was met with a lot of doubt and skepticism. The veterinary profession was having a difficult time accepting the fact that alternative medicine may have a place among our arsenal of drugs and surgical procedures.

We have a very large mixed animal practice in northwest New Mexico, and we have many animals suffering from arthritis fractures and the ravages of old age. Would the average client be open to trying a radically different form of treatment on their beloved pets? The answer to this question was a resounding yes. People were excited to try a new form of treatment which may increase the quality of life of their animals. They were especially thrilled to know that a lack of response seemed to be the worst that could

happen. To date, we have not documented any side effects with the use of this product. In some cases, a blood chemistry profile was established and checked after a period of time on the product, with special attention paid to the kidney and liver function tests.

Animals on trial have ranged from 6 months of age to 19 years of age, both canine and feline. Breeds range from Chihuahua to Newfoundland. Conditions being treated are various bone, ligament and tendon conditions, and various other conditions related to aging.

The effects of elk velvet on Chip were remarkable. After a period of time he moved with much greater ease and could go up and down stairs again, and his appetite and coat improved. Chip's quality of life improved greatly, and his life was extended for more than a year. Chip was the first of many animals I have watched respond favorably to elk velvet. Three case studies follow:

#### **Pogo**

Pogo was a male miniature dachshund with a variety of problems. He was 13 years old with a chronic, arthritic back and failing kidneys. Pogo had been on a variety of medications throughout his life, and he had been given the best of care by his owner. In March of 1998 on a cold, blustery day, Pogo's owner came into the hospital on the verge of tears. Her own health was also failing, but she came in to discuss putting Pogo to sleep. As we talked about his conditions and the medications he was on, it was clear his prognosis was not good.

"I can't stand seeing him suffer like this, Doctor. He can barely get out of his bed, and he often drags his hind end. It is very difficult for me to take him outside, and he doesn't even want his favorite foods."

I listened quietly to a scenario much too familiar to veterinarians who take care of companion animals. Because a pet's life span is so much shorter than ours, we have to go through the pain of watching it age and die. Often, in the case of elderly clients, their pets are their best friends and faithful companions. I asked Pogo's owner if she would let us examine Pogo and consider trying another treatment on him. She was reluctant at first to consider prolonging Pogo's misery, but with tears streaming down her face, she decided she would try one more time. I explained velvet antler to her, and told her about the properties of the medication. I explained that the product is all natural and we know of no serious side effects. I told her that the worst thing that might happen was that we would see no response. I also suggested that we stop all of Pogo's other medications.

As Pogo was examined, he was found to be thin and to experience pain upon palpation of his back and hips. His temperature, pulse and respiration were within normal ranges. Radiographs showed progressive bony changes in his vertebrae and hips, and calcification of some of his lumbar intervertebral discs. His blood work showed elevated kidney and liver function tests. All in all, Pogo looked very much like many of the geriatric pets we see in our hospital on a regular basis.

Pogo was started on 600 mg of velvet antler daily for two weeks. He was placed on a highly digestible kidney diet and free choice bottled water. The owner was instructed to bring Pogo back in two weeks for a progress report and a re-evaluation.

Eight days after Pogo was started on velvet antler, I heard a loud commotion in the lobby. Standing at the desk was Pogo's beaming owner. "Doctor!" she exclaimed, "You have to look at Pogo. I can't believe what I am seeing." She opened the door to the lobby and Pogo came flying in at a dead run. He jumped up on a bench and began barking out the window. I stared in utter amazement at this transformed little animal. A week ago he was ready to die, and now, with his tail wagging furiously, he was acting like a puppy again.

Pogo's owner took my hand in hers and asked, "How can I ever thank you?" Pogo continued to improve, and his velvet antler dosage was reduced to 300 mg daily. His appetite was back to normal, and his hair coat gained back some of the luster it had lost. His mobility was greatly improved, and his temperament was like the Pogo of old.

Pogo's owner passed away in the spring of 1999, and Pogo died a short time later. The passing of both was difficult for our staff, but Pogo's quality of life was extended for a full year, and I am sure they are both in a better place, and Pogo is still barking and wagging his tail.

### **Abigail**

Abigail is a 3-year-old basset hound. She is in excellent physical condition and belongs to a young lady who is a student at New Mexico State University. Abby was brought into our hospital in January of 1999. Upon examination, Abby was found to have an extremely painful left hind leg. The leg was non-weight bearing, and Abby snapped if you touched it. The owner said they were out for a walk and Abby took off chasing a rabbit. She said she heard Abby cry out, and the dog came back to her, carrying her leg. Abby was sedated and radiographs were taken. No fractures were noted, and upon palpation it was dislocated medially and the anterior cruciate ligament was stretched or torn.

As the injury was discussed with the owner, it became apparent that the young lady was not financially able to proceed with the recommended treatment. Normally, this condition requires surgical intervention. The ligaments are examined and repaired if necessary, and the patella is relocated and secured to prevent future dislocation. Few options were available; the owner elected to treat Abigail with manual replacement of the patella, a pressure wrap, and velvet antler. Abby was started on 900 mg velvet antler for two weeks, and then the dosage was adjusted down to 600 mg daily.

Since Abby was a college dog many miles from our hospital, she was not examined again for over six weeks. Upon re-examination, Abby had excellent mobility in her rear legs with only a slight change in gait of the injured limb. Her knee felt very stable upon palpation, and her temperament was as carefree as it had been before her injury. The owner reported that she had observed noticeable improvement in Abby's condition within ten days and that within three weeks Abby was no longer limping and appeared to be completely pain free.

Abby continues to take her velvet antler daily and eats the capsules like a treat. This is a situation where money dictated the course of treatment. Offering an alternative solution to problems is not only necessary at times, but is greatly welcome by pet owners. Being trained in conventional medicine makes it difficult at times to consider alternatives, but the results we have observed makes it apparent that alternative therapy may be as good or better than conventional medical treatment.

Abby's owner comments, "I am convinced velvet antler healed Abby's leg, and I have recommended it to many of my friends. The problem is, people cannot find it and veterinarians are not familiar with its use."

### **Mac**

Mac is an 8-year-old, slightly overweight Labrador. He has been a patient since he was 10 weeks old. Mac, like many Labs, suffers from a degenerative condition of his hips known as dysplasia. Dysplasia is a congenital defect in the hip joints. The hip is a ball and socket joint. Due to indiscriminate breeding, the ball often does not fit snugly in the socket, creating abnormal wear and causing calcium deposits to build up as the body tries to repair the damage. The result is a painful life-long abnormality of the joints. Treatment of this condition is often palliative, and anti-inflammatory drugs and pain medications are the most often prescribed. Recent uses of compounds to increase joint fluids or lubricants and repair cartilage damaged have been found to be effective in slowing down the progression of this disease. These compounds, chondroitin sulfate and glucosamine sulfate, are found in velvet antler. It is our opinion that the synergistic effect of these compounds and other healing factors found in velvet antler are much more effective than any of the compounds by themselves.

For several years Mac has experienced abnormal gait and pain due to dysplasia, especially after prolonged exercise such as hunting or playing ball. He was radiographically diagnosed with grade II dysplasia and has been on various forms of treatment for several years. Use of velvet antler was explained to Mac's owner in early 1998, and the owner elected to try the product.

"I want Mac to enjoy the things he was bred to do, and that is a very active lifestyle. I am not comfortable with the pain medication and all of the side effects. If this stuff works and it is not harmful to him, I am all for it." Mac was started on 900 mg of velvet antler daily for two weeks and then his dosage was lowered to 600 mg daily. He has remained pain free since starting on velvet antler, and his owner is extremely satisfied with the results. He stated, "I did not notice an immediate response with the medicine. I just noticed that Mac's limp was gone, and he did not 'sore up' after hard exercise. I can also tell when I forget to give him his pills. This is good stuff, and I recommend it to anyone who loves their pet."

#### **Conclusion**

These, and countless other case studies, have made it clear to me that velvet antler has a place on my shelf for treating a number of osteoarthritic and musculoskeletal conditions in animals. Not all animals respond, but then, an aspirin does not work on all headaches. Alternative treatments for many conditions are becoming more commonplace in both people and pets.

If North America used the product, it would forever eliminate the elk industry's dependence on the volatility of the Asian market. Many producers in the industry have stepped forward to help support the work we have started. The people who have helped by supplying product and support were Elk Valley Processors, Dr. Ray Favero, Dr. Glen Zebarth, NATRAflex Brands, Colorado Genetics, Eric Falk, Rob Pek and other velvet producers.

The animal industry in North America is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry. Everything from medicine to nutraceuticals to designer collars and sweaters to pet Hiltons are available for pets. The equine industry is another large market area generating billions per year. These markets need to be accessed and encouraged. A demand far exceeding the supply of quality velvet could develop and have a positive impact on raw velvet prices and live animal prices.

#### **Future Reports**

A series of articles is being prepared for publication in the months to come, and some new and detailed studies are being planned for all species of animals. The animals I have treated over the past 18 months have proven to me that many of the claims made concerning the use of velvet antler as an alternative treatment are true. Each of us should take the time to share the benefits of this product with friends and neighbors. The honesty of animals has proven to this veterinarian that elk velvet is, in fact, more reality than myth.