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Read with Purpose: How to Approach This Book

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1.1 Introduction: Why This Book

Hannah was once told by a colleague that osteoarthritis (OA) is "boring." Well, we are here to tell you that if you are doing it right, management of OA is anything *but* boring. At times challenging, frustrating, rewarding, creative, dynamic, empowering, hopeful, and complex are all adjectives that we would better ascribe to this discipline of veterinary medicine.

Developing this book has been a labor of love, rooted in our passion and belief that veterinary professionals need resources and tools to help them practice the highest level of care for their patients with joint disease and chronic pain. Historically, management of OA was perhaps simply a matter of "rest and Rimadyl®," in other words, a one-size-fits-all treatment plan of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and activity restrictions, only prescribed to geriatric dogs that were really struggling. If this is how you were taught or is your current approach, we can see why that would be boring and can assure you by the end of this book you will see the disease and our role in managing it completely differently.

OA is far from a new disease, but the ways that we recognize, diagnose, and manage the condition have evolved substantially. OA and associated pain demand thoughtful and strategic management to preserve the quality of life (QoL) for dogs and their caregivers. But every dog and caregiver is unique, requiring an empathetic, individualized management plan. This requires more work, and when considering all of the other work-related pressures we endure, we can comprehend that the convenience of the one-size-fits-all, "boring" approach to OA management may be more appealing to some. But let's all agree that we didn't get into the veterinary profession for an easy job. We are here for the love of our patients, to foster the human–animal bond, and for the opportunity to grow and be challenged professionally.

This book is designed to provide veterinary professionals with a practical, evidence-guided and compassionate approach to improving the lives of dogs with OA. Our goal is to translate what we and our esteemed coauthors know and do everyday in practice into an invaluable resource to be used in classrooms, general practice, specialty hospitals, and everywhere in between.

1.2 What to Expect from This Book

This book introduces a framework called **The OA Blueprint** that guides practitioners through the steps necessary to provide individualized, effective, and lifelong OA care. Across six sections, you'll find practical guidance, summary of the current evidence, top tips, resources, and real-life case examples that connect rapidly developing science with day-to-day clinical realities.

Several foundational themes shape the philosophy and recommendations presented in this book. Understanding and implementing these principles is integral to successful OA management (and veterinary care in general), and therefore, these themes will be woven into each chapter.

1.3 Guiding Principles of the OA Blueprint and This Textbook

- **Biopsychosocial model**: Pain isn't just about the joints.
  This model recognizes that pain and disease are influenced not only by physical factors but also by psychological and social components. In OA, this means understanding that emotions like fear or stress, and environmental or social factors found within caregiver routines, all influence the dog's experience of pain. Furthermore, it recognizes that pain extends beyond the biological processes occurring in the affected joint; consequences of living with daily pain and subsequent changes to the nervous system result in the experience of pain being felt throughout the body and mind.
- **Stress-minimizing interactions**: Dogs with OA are often painful and anxious. Low-stress care is not optional; it is essential.
  Dogs experiencing chronic pain are often in a state of stress and display fear and anxiety, which can exacerbate their condition. Low-stress and behaviorally sensitive management techniques are essential to ensuring the dog's comfort during examinations, diagnostics, and treatments. These practices reduce fear and promote cooperation, leading to more accurate assessments and improved outcomes.
- **The team approach**: Effective OA care depends on collaboration.
  Managing canine OA requires teamwork. Veterinarians, technicians/nurses, specialists, allied professionals, caregivers, and even the dogs themselves contribute to the success of the management plan. Leveraging the strengths and expertise of each team member and utilizing effective communication ensures comprehensive care.
- **Caregivers are allies**: They are part of the team, not obstacles to overcome.
  Clear, empathetic communication with caregivers is often overlooked, yet it is one of the most powerful tools in managing OA. It fosters trust, improves concordance to treatment plans, and enables shared decision-making. This book uses the term "caregiver" intentionally, reflecting the depth of the human–animal bond and the central role that caregivers play as advocates and teammates in their dog's lifelong care.
- **Early detection is everything**: OA starts early – so should our interventions.
  Time can be a critical factor in OA management. Early detection and timely intervention can potentially slow disease progression, preserve mobility, and maintain excellent QoL. Proactive measures, including routine screenings, caregiver education, and weight management, can make a significant difference. Some surgical procedures designed to reduce or prevent OA have a narrow window of opportunity, reinforcing the importance of screening for joint disease in puppies.
- **Behavior is a clue**: Changes in demeanor, activity, or routine often reflect discomfort. Don't ignore the subtle signs.
  Chronic pain impacts not just physical health but also emotional well-being. Behavioral changes, such as increased irritability, withdrawal, or reduced tolerance for interaction, may signal underlying pain. Recognizing and addressing these changes is central to diagnosing and managing OA.
- **Evidence-guided care**: Let the best available research inform your practice, but always adapt your approach to the individual.
  With countless therapies available for OA management, prioritizing evidence-based approaches is essential. Proven methods, such as pharmacologic pain management and weight control, should form the foundation of every plan. Less well-evidenced adjunctive therapies are considered when foundational strategies require supplementation and physical function requires support.
- **Context matters**: Every dog is different. Every caregiver is different. The context drives the plan.
  OA management is never one-size-fits-all. Context matters, whether it's the dog's age, job, comorbidities, home environment, or the caregiver's financial and emotional capacity. A successful plan must be realistic, sustainable, and aligned with the dog–caregiver team's unique needs and goals. Contextual care means treating the whole patient, not just the joint, and considers the "budgets" of the care team.
- **Rechecks drive success and plans must evolve**: Dogs change. Pain changes. Our plans must change too.
  Rechecks are not a mere formality; they are not a "catch-up consult"; they are pivotal in maintaining the effectiveness of OA management. Regular evaluations allow practitioners to revise plans, address emerging issues, and ensure caregiver compliance with the mutually agreed-upon care plan.

- **OA is serious**: Left unmanaged, OA can become a life-limiting disease. Our role is to change that trajectory.
  OA is a very common condition that typically starts to develop in young dogs. Yet, most of the time it isn't diagnosed until the disease is advanced, at which point, symptoms of pain become obvious but much more difficult to control.
  Our vision is a time when screening for joint disease is as routine as auscultating the heart, when veterinary teams and caregivers begin discussing signs of pain and discomfort to look out for in puppies, and strategies to preserve mobility and reduce the development of maladaptive pain are habitually part of the veterinarian's preventative care conversations.

1.4 What Comes Next

This introductory section aims to serve as motivation for the journey through the rest of the textbook. The Guiding Principles and OA Blueprint introduced here will be explored in greater detail across the sections of the book. From setting up a team for success to understanding diagnosis, crafting treatment plans, and addressing end-of-life care, each chapter builds on these foundations to provide a comprehensive, yet easy to engage with resource for managing this complex condition.

As readers delve deeper, they will gain the tools and knowledge needed to approach OA management with **competence, confidence, and compassion**. Together, we can make a profound difference in the lives of dogs and their caregivers, ensuring that OA is managed not as a burden but as an opportunity for thoughtful, effective care.

The sections that follow are built to support you in mastering the OA Blueprint:

- **Chapter 3:** Reviews OA pathophysiology and maladaptive pain while providing practical applications. This chapter sets you up for understanding all of the topics that follow in the rest of the book and to know why they are important for your patients. We promise it will make you see OA in a new way!
- **Section 2: Setting the team up for success**: Covers the team-based approach, the role of fear and anxiety in chronic pain, effective communication with caregivers, and how to create an OA-friendly practice culture.
- **Section 3: Diagnosis and beyond**: Reviews differential diagnoses for OA and comorbidities that are common in dogs with OA, explains low-stress orthopedic exams, radiographic interpretation, and clinical metrology tools.
- **Section 4: Building the plan**: Focuses on foundational therapies: pharmacologic pain control, nutrition and weight management, exercise, and home environment modifications.
- **Section 5: Adjunctive therapies**: Covers additional options that may be appropriate for some patients, such as surgery, rehabilitation, intra-articular injections, supplements, and acupuncture.
- **Section 6: Palliative care and end-of-life decisions**: Discusses managing OA when it becomes refractory to care, approaching quality-of-life conversations, and providing compassionate guidance at the end of life.

1.5 Final Thoughts

This book is not a compendium of every study on OA or the modalities used to treat pain. It is meant as a practical reference guide that can help you approach OA with realistic optimism and maybe even enthusiasm. The dogs in your care need a thoughtful, evidence-guided team committed to the challenge of OA and ready to experience the rewards that come with knowing you are doing the best you can for your patients.

Let's get started!

Your allies in OA care,

Kristin and Hannah