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## THE AAPI VETERINARIAN BLAZING TWO TRAILS: CANNABIS AND VETERINARY MEDICINE

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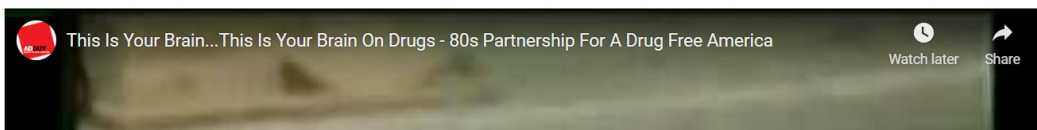
By Jen Reeder



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These days, Dr. Tim Shu has a radically different take on cannabis than he did as an Asian American kid growing up in Texas in the 1990s.

“My only exposure to cannabis back then was through the D.A.R.E. program – the commercials on TV that essentially said if you ever took a hit of weed, then your life would go nowhere and you would end up turning into a cocoon in a chair, or something like that,” he tells The News Station. “I still remember, ‘This is your brain, this is your brain on drugs,’ and they showed fried eggs. The message was that you were going to amount to nothing if you ever touched cannabis.”





In 2009, after graduating with a doctorate in Veterinary Medicine from Texas A&M University, Shu moved to California to work at an animal hospital – and was shocked to find a completely different culture with “dispensaries left and right and everywhere.”

As he heard stories of how the plant was positively impacting the lives of people and pets – and as clients repeatedly asked him for alternative treatments for their pets’ chronic pain – he started researching the medical benefits of cannabis through a scientific lens.

**“As health practitioners, we have the moral and ethical obligation to explore all potential therapeutic avenues,” Shu says. “So my perspective is that if cannabis has therapeutic benefits and is able to help animals out, we absolutely owe it to our patients and our clients to explore that avenue.”**

So in 2015, Shu left private practice to found [VETCBD](#), a veterinary cannabis company. He’s heard from numerous clients that his products have helped their pets with pain, anxiety, inflammation, nausea and appetite loss, and seizures.

In one memorable instance, a 5-year-old Bichon Frise named Gibson was almost out of options. He was having daily grand mal seizures despite taking anti-seizure medications, and his owners were considering euthanasia since his quality of life was suffering. They decided to give cannabis a shot.

“Lo and behold, cannabis stopped the seizures,” he says. “In this situation, cannabis was quite literally lifesaving for this dog.”



Shu, 39, has seen his products increase mobility for his 13-year-old pit bull, Caden, who suffers from arthritis and acts as a “big pillow” for his Chihuahua, Serappy. He also frequently hears from clients who try VETCBD as a last resort for dogs and cats suffering from degenerative osteoarthritis and are delighted when their pets can walk again.

“I don’t want to use language that doesn’t align scientifically or medically, but to the owners, it’s not uncommon for them to report that it feels like a miracle to them,” he says.



*VETCBD is intended to help cats and dogs with joint mobility and normal brain function.*

Despite a deluge of anecdotal evidence and a few studies that found cannabis to be beneficial for dogs with [osteoarthritis](#) and [epilepsy](#), cannabis faces an uphill battle for acceptance in veterinary medicine.

When states legalize medicinal and recreational marijuana use, it only applies to humans. Veterinarians can lose their licenses or face legal liability for recommending cannabis to clients, and many state veterinary boards don’t allow veterinarians to even discuss it.

This can lead people to try to medicate their dogs using their own stash, which can have dire consequences since THC can be toxic to dogs, particularly in higher doses and when ingested with butter or oil. The 2012 retrospective [study](#) “Evaluation of trends in marijuana toxicosis in dogs living in a state with legalized medical marijuana” found a four-fold increase in marijuana toxicosis cases in Colorado following legalization, and that two dogs died after eating edibles made with marijuana butter.

This is one reason why advocates believe veterinarians should be able to advise clients about pets and cannabis, such as using specially formulated products. Earlier this year, Shu supported [legislation](#) that would have made it legal for veterinarians in California to recommend cannabis for patients, but it’s currently languishing.

“What this does is really ties the hands of the veterinarian behind their back because pet owners are looking to them for information. And they’re saying, ‘I don’t know. I can’t talk about it,’” he says. “This leaves the pet owner to do the research on their own, and what they pull up from Google may not always be the most ideal information.”

To combat misinformation, he speaks at conferences about veterinary uses of cannabis and offers consultations through his company. Shu – who was born in America and is ethnically Chinese – also spends time talking to Asian-immigrant communities in his adopted hometown of Los Angeles about the medicinal benefits and potential of cannabis, since it is often viewed as dangerous in Asian countries despite its history.



“When you look back at some of the earliest mentions of cannabis as a therapeutic, and used as a medicine, you’ll find it in ancient Chinese texts. They’ll talk about its use as an analgesic for pain,” he notes.

To help homeless pets with pain and other issues, for every tincture purchase VETCBD donates one tincture of hemp-derived CBD oil to local shelters and rescue organizations through its “One Fur One” program. In May, the company announced an 18-month partnership with the national nonprofit [Best Friends Animal Society](#).

“We’re also exploring how CBD can be useful for the shelter animals and rescue animals to be able to decrease their rates of stress and anxiety and increase their rates of adoptability,” he says. “I want to be able to create as great a positive impact as I can on as large a scale as possible, and going the cannabis route is a way to do that.”

Shu’s genuine commitment to helping animals through cannabis appeals to Los Angeles resident Maria Calabrese. Like Shu, she grew up thinking cannabis products were wrong – “I was a child of D.A.R.E., Nancy Reagan just said no,” as she quipped to The News Station. But when her beloved rescue dog, Juanita, was at death’s door from congestive heart failure and severe arthritis, her outlook changed.

After hearing Shu speak at a [CatCon](#) panel titled “Cats and Cannabis: What You Need To Know Meow,” she purchased a VETCBD product she credits with giving Juanita another 10 months of quality life (in conjunction with heart medication) by helping with her pain and increasing her mobility.



*Maria Calabrese with her dog, Juanita*

“I think it also helped her anxiety, because she had such difficulty breathing at times from the heart failure,” she recalls. “She was just in a calm, peaceful state.”

As a result of the experience, Calabrese founded [Green Bee Life](#), a cannabis lifestyle platform, and successfully used VETCBD products to help her 12-year-old German Shepherd, Roxy, cope with a terrible noise aversion to fireworks.

Calabrese says she applauds Shu’s trailblazing career and passion for helping others.

“He has to give up a lot and risk a lot as a veterinarian,” she says. “He’s a pioneer.”



### Jen Reeder

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Bylines include CNN, BBC News, The Christian Science Monitor, The Daily Beast, Inside Your Dog’s Mind, HuffPost, TODAY.com, PBS’s Next Avenue and many others. Visit her at [JenReeder.com](#).

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