



HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR

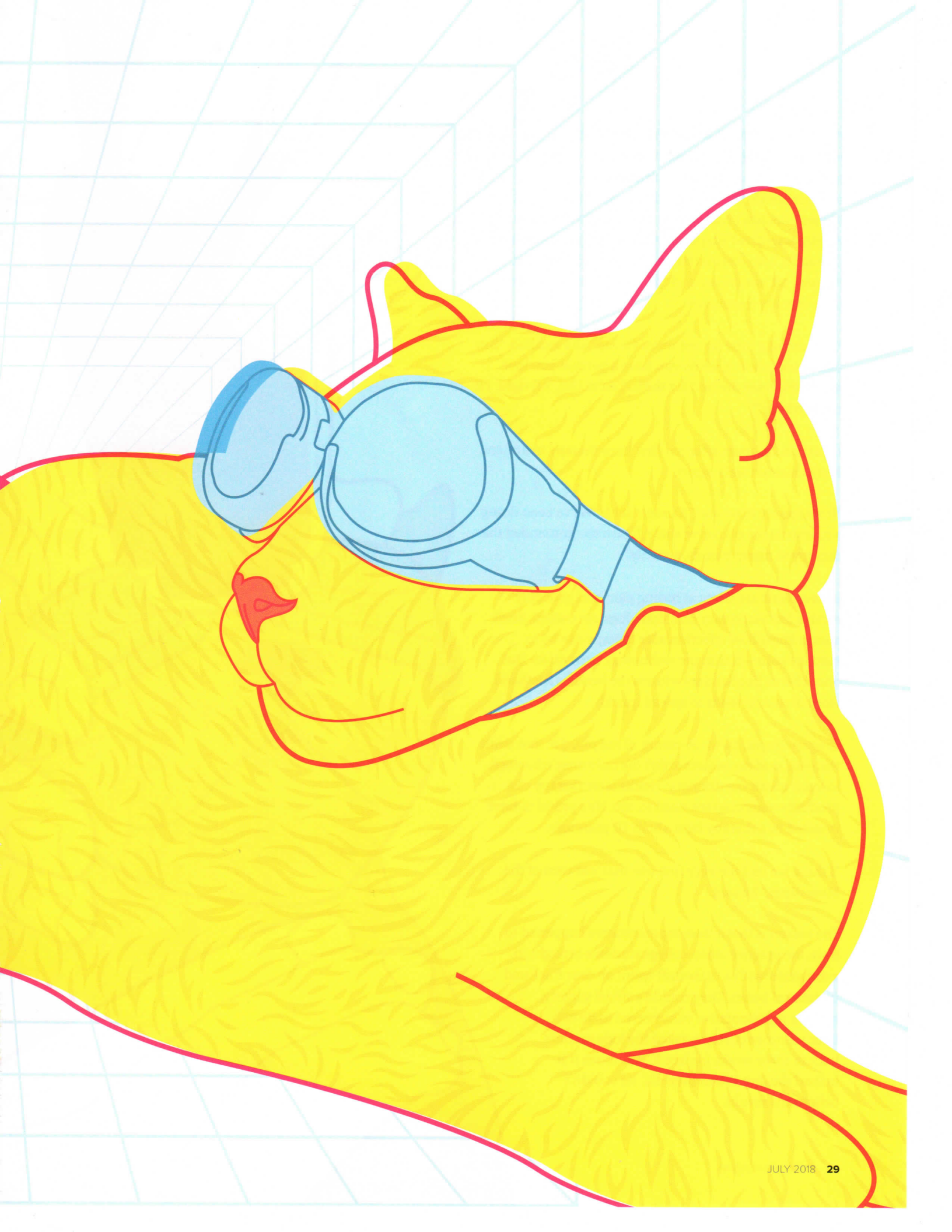
LASER

WITH PATIENTS WHO ARE

CATS

Managing Feline Pain with Therapy Lasers—
And Letting Cat Owners Know It's Not
Science Fiction

by Jen Reeder



A FEW YEARS AGO, MICHELLE SANDERS HAD NEVER HEARD of laser therapy for cats. But one morning last summer, she and her family woke to find their beloved senior cat Ninjette couldn't walk. When she brought the feline to AAHA-accredited Arapahoe Animal Hospital in Boulder, Colorado, her veterinarian said it looked like the cat jumped off something and "fell funny"—and suggested laser therapy treatments.

"It sounded a little far out there for me," she recalled. "But you know how it is when you have a pet that you love and want to see the best for them. You're like, 'All right. I'll try anything.'"

Less than 24 hours after her first laser therapy treatment, Ninjette could walk again.

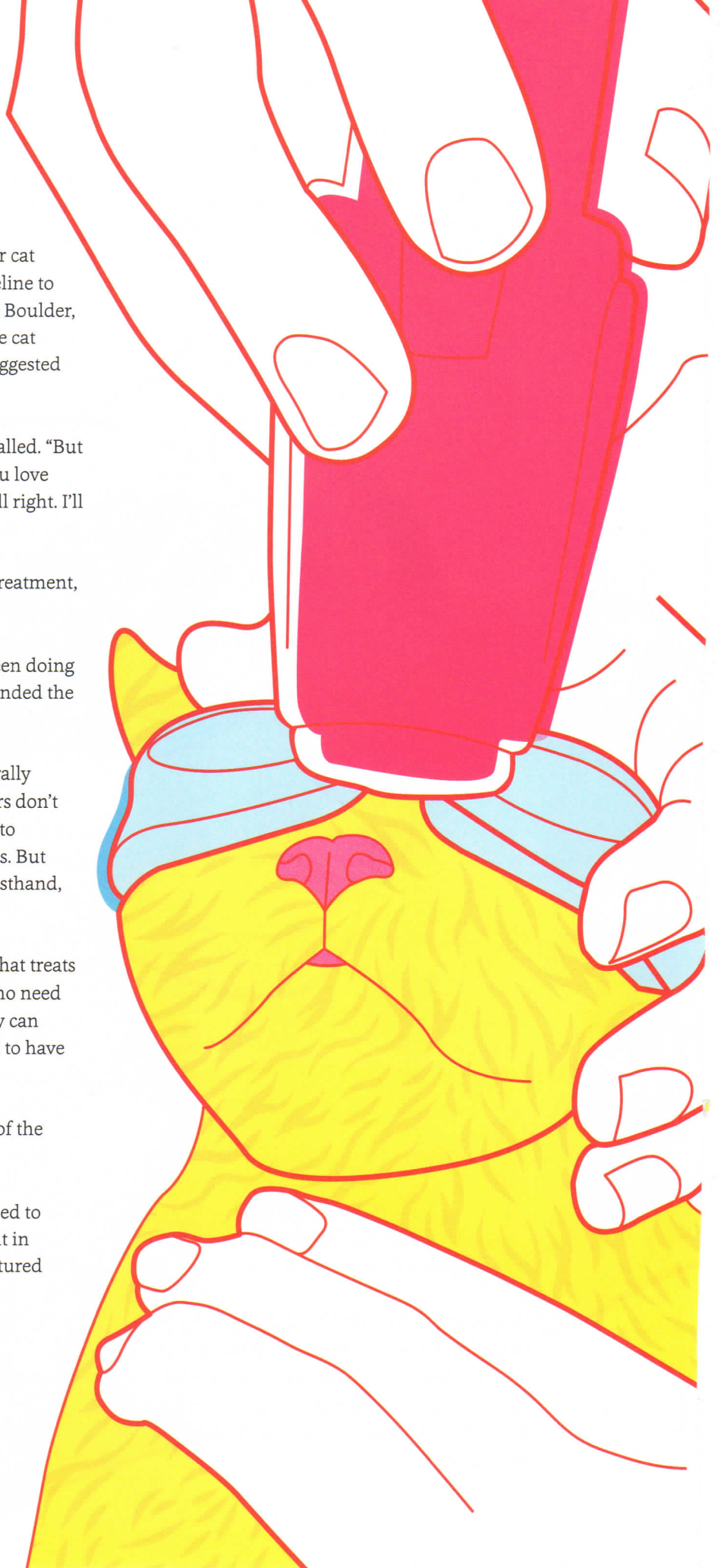
"It was pretty dramatic," Sanders said. "We've been doing a maintenance plan ever since. I have recommended the therapy to many friends, actually."

Because cats are adept at hiding pain and generally receive less veterinary care than dogs, cat owners don't always know how effective laser therapy can be to manage pain—or that the technology even exists. But once clients like Sanders witness the benefits firsthand, word of mouth tends to spread quickly.

Gregory Hayes, DVM, co-owner of the practice that treats Ninjette, said cat owners aren't the only ones who need to learn about the dramatic results laser therapy can produce—veterinarians need to, too. He's proud to have invested in a therapy laser about 16 years ago.

"I think we had the very first one that was west of the Mississippi," he said.

The reason is that a laser representative happened to be in the practice when college students brought in a rottweiler with a makeshift splint on four fractured metatarsal bones. They couldn't afford surgery, and the representative volunteered to do two laser treatments. Hayes asked the kids to come back in three weeks for free X-rays to see if it helped the dog. When they did, he couldn't believe the results.



“A total malunion on an old, overweight dog had turned to a bone that was healing like a puppy on all four of them,” he recounted. “I was probably in practice for 40 years by then, and I only needed to see that once to know that was the laser. I bought it immediately.”

Now, he has two Class IV lasers (Companion) for each of Arapahoe Animal Hospital’s two locations, which a designated laser therapy coordinator uses 100–150 times per week on patients. He said laser therapy is a terrific alternative to acupuncture for cats, who don’t tend to tolerate needles well. One cat even had necrotic tissue so revitalized by laser therapy that it was spared a limb amputation.

“You can use light therapy to heal skin, to heal bones, to get rid of fungus, to do a lot of things for you, and the cat feels nothing other than a tiny bit of heat,” Hayes said.

He added that it’s easy to convince clients to try laser therapy when they see the conviction of the veterinary team.

“It’s not a tough sell,” he said. “Once you believe in it and see it and use it, when you’re talking to your client, it’s not, ‘Boy, it would be nice if you could do this.’ It’s called, ‘We’ve got to do this.’”

He’s had so many clients see their pets get better and ask how they can get laser therapy for themselves that he refers them to a local physical therapist with the tool. But many pet owners don’t have the chance to witness the benefits for themselves since not all of his colleagues share his conviction about the efficacy of Class IV lasers, he said.

“That laser is being so underused in so many arenas that it’s almost a tragedy,” he said. “I think the expense keeps a lot of veterinarians from getting one. But if they took the expense factor out and saw what it really did and tried it for three weeks, they would never quit using it.”

While the lack of consistent clinical results for therapy laser use in the 1980s and 1990s led to some skepticism in the profession, technological advances and greater understanding of proper dosages have led to wider acceptance and use over the last decade.

Amanda Hoffmeyer, director of marketing for Companion Animal Health, estimated that 60% of small animal practices now utilize therapy lasers.

“It’s definitely not a fringe thing anymore,” she said. “It’s really experienced a renaissance. . . . One of the biggest changes over the last 10 years is that we know a lot more about how to get the right amount of light to target tissue, and because of that, we’ve been able to see laser treatments be much more effective than the treatments of the past.”

She said laser therapy is a good solution for cats in pain since they typically don’t like to take pills. Cat owners can appreciate having a drug-free, surgery-free alternative, and practices benefit because it’s not necessary for veterinarians to operate the tool; typically, veterinary technicians handle laser therapy for a practice.

“The thing about lasers is we don’t say that it is a magic cure all,” she noted. “But it is a part of a protocol that gets pets back to feeling like themselves.”

Jason Dean, RVT, CCRP, dedicates his time to rehabilitation therapy at AAHA-accredited Long Animal Hospital and Emergency Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. He provides laser therapy for about 45 patients per week—mostly dogs. But he has had success with helping control pain and inflammation for cats with the modality and likes having an alternative to opioids for chronic arthritis management. He uses the Class IV laser primarily for arthritis, wounds, and dentals.

“Every cat that I’ve lasered, the owners have been pleased with the outcome—100%,” he said.

At a previous practice, Dean had success with a cat who liked to be petted on the head but would become upset whenever touched below his mid-back due to painful hips. Dean would lift the lid off the cat’s carrier and perform laser therapy on the back and hips. Within two and a half weeks, the clients were able to brush their cat for the first time in a year.

“It’s pretty profound as far as what helps them,” he said.

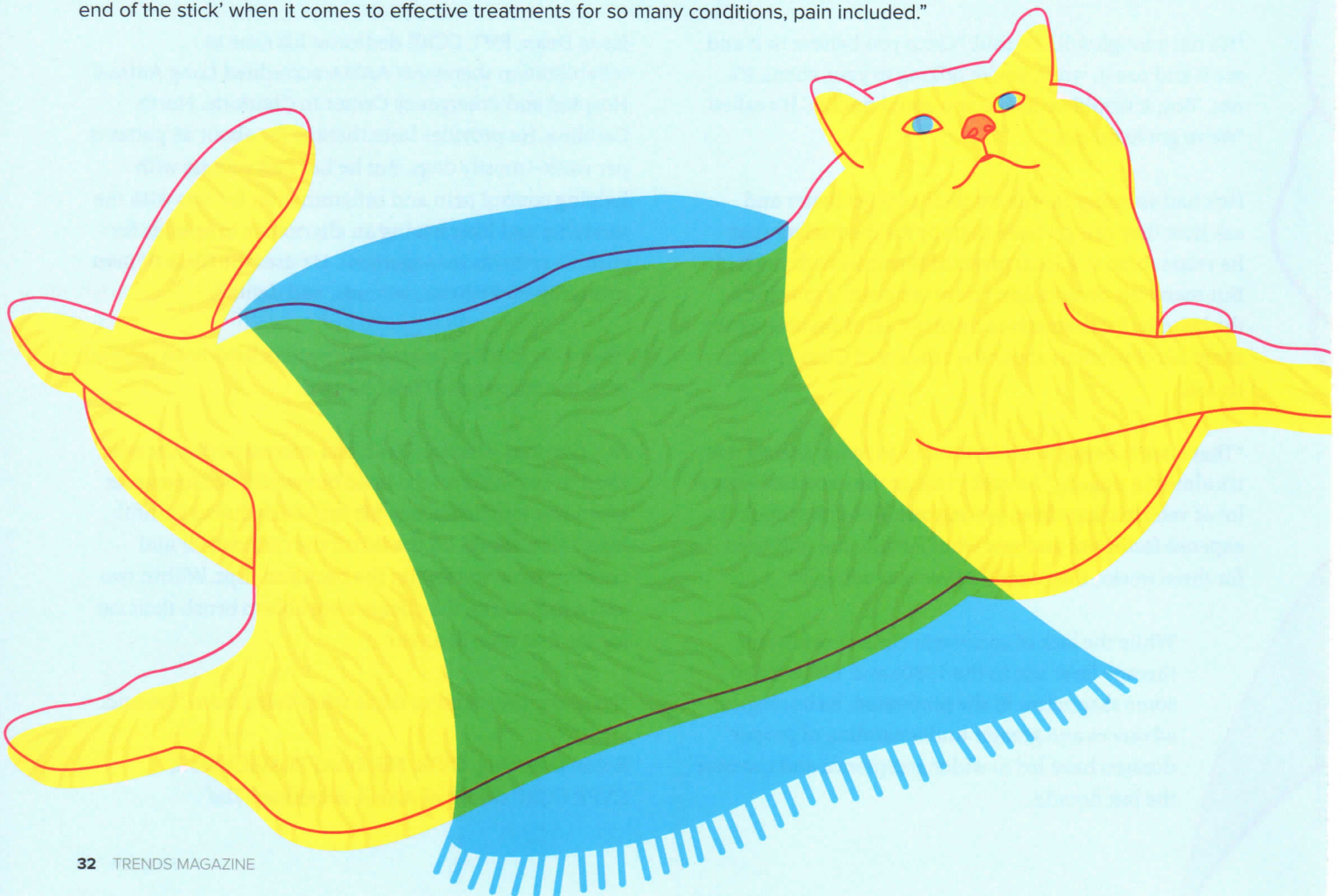
Robin Downing, DVM, MS, DAAPM, DACVSMR, CVPP, CCRP, owner of AAHA-accredited The

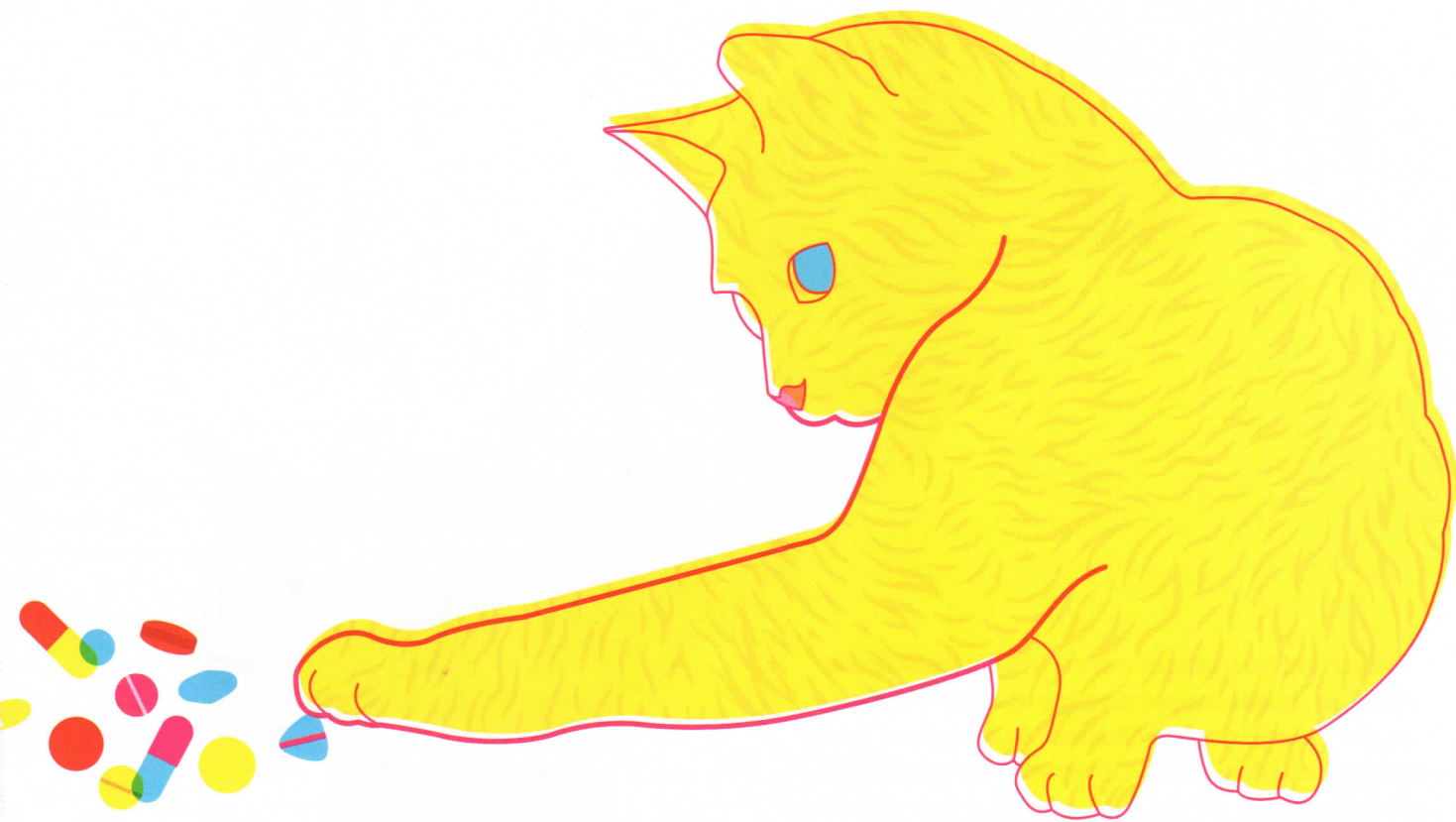
Techniques for Feline Laser Therapy Sessions

Robin Downing, DVM, MS, DAAPM, DACVSMR, CVPP, CCRP, said because hers is a Cat Friendly Practice, the team doesn't need to do anything out of the ordinary to make cats comfortable during laser therapy treatments. Downing shared:

- We do not take cats away from their owners for treatment.
- We have the laser and all of the accessories (eyewear for both cats and humans) in the exam room before the cat and owner enter in order to minimize in-and-out traffic.
- Our cat-only exam room has natural light from a window to the outside, and we have a recessed incandescent light on a rheostat in the ceiling for those days when it gets dark at 4 p.m. Great for creating a "mood!"
- We utilize a Feliway diffuser and keep the exam room doors closed to contain the pheromone for maximum positive effect.
- We have a towel/blanket warmer filled with infant-receiving blankets spritzed with Feliway; we refer to these as "hot yoga blankets," which always brings a smile to the owner. We place one under the cat, and one is draped over them.
- If the cats come with their own beds (which they often do), then we allow them to recline in their own beds with the hot yoga blanket over them as we prepare for treatment.
- We have an iCalm pod/speaker playing the iCalm Cat selections in the room on an endless loop.
- I position myself on a hydraulic stool so that I can keep myself at the level of the cat rather than looming over them.
- With the Class IV laser that I use, my treatment times are kept to a minimum, so I do not exceed the cat's willingness to be patient and sit still.

Downing concluded, "Therapeutic laser treatments for cats should be a part of an overall standard of care. Cats are already challenging to diagnose and treat, and here we have a technology that can do so much for a species that often gets the 'short end of the stick' when it comes to effective treatments for so many conditions, pain included."





Downing Center for Animal Pain Management, and hospital director of AAHA-accredited Windsor Veterinary Clinic in Windsor, Colorado, said that as a pain and rehabilitation specialist, therapeutic laser is a very important tool in her pain management toolbox. Without it, she said, she could not practice the same level of comprehensive pain management.

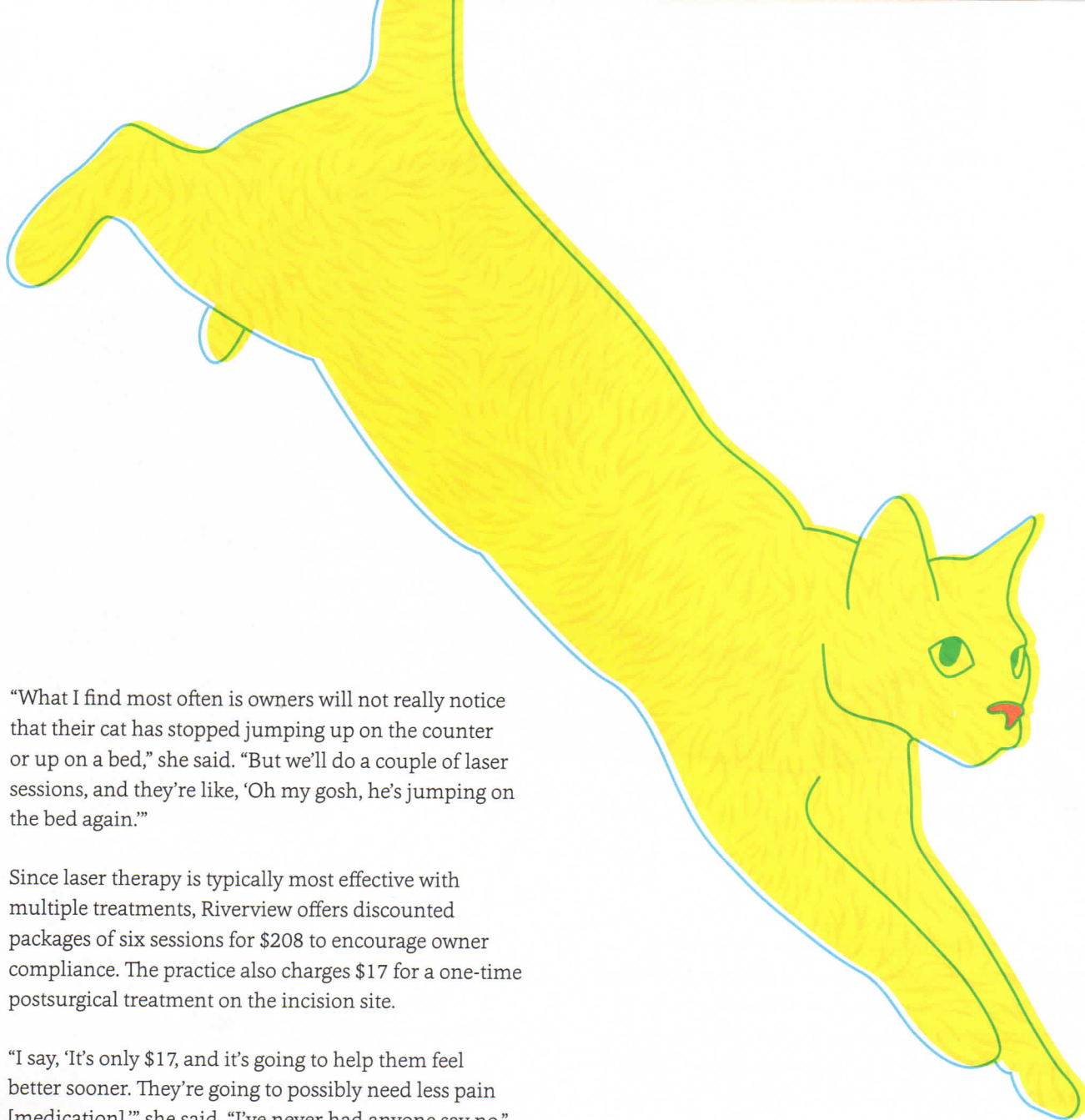
“The photobiomodulation that therapeutic laser provides is unique among the various physical modalities we can leverage,” Downing said. “It activates tissues on a cellular level by increasing net ATP (the energy currency of cells). It also activates tissues at a macroscopic level by decreasing inflammation, increasing microcirculation, and modifying nerve conduction velocities, which decreases pain. There are truly no other modalities that provide this complement of effects.”

She’s been surprised by how well her feline patients have accepted laser therapy treatments and credits the success with utilizing Fear Free handling techniques (see page 32).

Laser therapy is a good solution for cats in pain since they typically don’t like to take pills.

“One thing that I recognized very early in my practice career—I have now been in practice 32 years—is that the majority of cats who get labeled as ‘bad actors’ because they are fractious in the exam room are often [in pain],” she said. “Their ongoing and constant pain means that they equate human contact/touching with torture. . . . Having an open mind to identify these cats opens the door to leverage therapy lasers to help them get some immediate pain relief and to help reduce their fear, anxiety, and stress for that visit and for subsequent visits.”

Marianne McClain, CVT, CCRP, at AAHA-accredited Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango, Colorado, said she makes home visits to offer blood pressure and glucose checks, nail trims, and laser therapy treatments to cats. Still, most of her patients are dogs because they aren’t as adept at hiding pain as cats.



“What I find most often is owners will not really notice that their cat has stopped jumping up on the counter or up on a bed,” she said. “But we’ll do a couple of laser sessions, and they’re like, ‘Oh my gosh, he’s jumping on the bed again.’”

Since laser therapy is typically most effective with multiple treatments, Riverview offers discounted packages of six sessions for \$208 to encourage owner compliance. The practice also charges \$17 for a one-time postsurgical treatment on the incision site.

“I say, ‘It’s only \$17, and it’s going to help them feel better sooner. They’re going to possibly need less pain [medication],’” she said. “I’ve never had anyone say no.”

Brodie Owens, DVM, associate veterinarian at AAHA-accredited Plymouth Heights Pet Hospital in New Hope, Minnesota, said the practice offers laser therapy as part of surgical packages. The team takes the opportunity to discuss it for spay/neuters so that owners will know about the modality early in their pet’s life.

“I do see support staff doing a good job of mentioning it as therapy when a cat or dog comes in for something that’s painful,” he said. “Within the clinic, a lot of us have used it on our own pets, so we can speak to them about seeing the benefits of it.”

Clients can also see positive results in Daisy, a hospital cat with arthritis whose activity level has improved thanks

to regular laser therapy. When clients opt for a session for their own cat, they can sit comfortably on a couch in the exam room with their pet on their lap.

“I really believe that laser therapy can be beneficial even for things like ear infections. [For] anything that causes pain, it’s an option available to help manage that pain for that pet,” Owens said. “It would be great to have it out there so more cat owners—and dog owners—know it’s available.” ✨



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of both the Cat Writers Association and the Dog Writers Association of America. She credits laser therapy with helping her dog Peach recover from knee surgery.