

Take Two Llamas and Call Me in the Morning

by Con Chapman

A Massachusetts nursing home that doesn't believe in antipsychotic drugs uses alternative methods to calm patients including a llama named Travis, whom a caretaker leads through the halls.

The Boston Globe



Over-the-counter generic.

We had tried everything with Mr. McKelvey—drugs, electroshock, Wheel of Fortune—but nothing seemed to calm his agitated mind. He would wander the wards, enter other patients' rooms and move their personal items—family photos, eyeglasses, much-beloved *tchotchkes*—not out of malice, as we ultimately learned, but from a deep-seated sense of aggrieved mischief-making, which is totally different.

Still, he was at times a danger to himself. He would wander off the grounds seeking—we didn't know what. I thought it was time to call in a specialist from Boston's extensive camelid-based therapeutic community.



Crack team of specialists

"Do you have the LLamatologists Directory?" I called to the young woman who was interning with us in the geronto-petting zoo ward.

"Right here, doctor," she said in a voice made husky by the long nights she was on call, tending to the various South American fauna needs of our patients. "But are you sure a llama is . . . appropriate?"

I gave her a look that spoke volumes—nos. 2A through 4 of the International Encyclopedia of Camelid Medicine. "And what, may I ask, do you propose as an alternative?" I asked skeptically. You have to put these young people with their "holistic" medicine in their place before they start questioning tried-and-true methods the elder statesmen of the profession have perfected after years of stepping into llama poop.



"You sure stepped in that one."

"Perhaps an alpaca, or a guanaco—maybe even a vicuna," she said, looking for all the world as if she had just stepped out of a particularly overwrought episode of *Grey's Anatomy*.

"Shouldn't you have added a *tilde* to the 'n' of that last species?"

"It is the internet—there is only so much I can do by way of punctuation," she said, her eyes narrowed scornfully. I knew what she was thinking; I was past my prime, old-and-in-the-way, a hidebound relic of a bygone . . .

"Would you stop with the internal monologue," she said finally. "We only have so much time."

I granted her that much. "How many llamatologists are there?"

"There's Llama, Dr. Llance; Dr. Llarry; Dr. Llamont; and Dr. LleMoyné."

"What's up with the last guy?" I asked.

"He's from Missouri—what did you expect?"

I'm not an East Coast snob—even though I've never been further west than Kenmore Square—but still, I didn't want to be questioned in hindsight. Or foresight.

"Where did he go to school?"

"MIT."

"Mascot?"

"The beaver—nature's engineers."



Chicks dig beavers.

"Is he board-certified?"

"Looks like it."

"No record of disciplinary proceedings?"

"He's domesticated—and lanolin free."

I've never understood why that last factor was important, but in my head I could hear myself defending the referral by saying "I checked him out—not a drop of lanolin on him."

I hesitated for just a moment, then said "All right . . . ring him up."



Baby llamas—kissing!

He was there in two shakes of a lamb's tail, which the lamb didn't appreciate one bit.

"You are in need of a llamatologist?" he asked as he stood at my doorstep.

"Not me—Mr. McKelvey. One of our toughest patients."

"What seems to be the problem?"



Rastallamaferian

"Advanced dementia, but he's not responding to standard petting-zoo therapy."

"It may be too late," LleMoyné said. "Which ward is he in?"

"Down the hall, to the left," I said.

He slipped on the short, white coat that is the trademark of the healing profession. I followed him as he went and could tell from his gait—and the huge chunks of dung he left behind—that he was a true professional.

We entered the Alzheimer's ward—Alzheimer was out, so he spoke to the nurse on duty.

“Which one's McKelvey?” he asked sharply.

“The cantankerous old coot over against the wall.”

LleMoyne sized him up and said “I can handle him.”

Bachelor party llama

We approached the old man's bed and LleMoyne turned on his bedside manner.

"Well, well," he said apropos of nothing in particular. "How's the world treating you?"

"Damn nurses won't let me have my CAKE!" he screamed into the air, not looking us in the eye.

"Have you finished your vegetables yet?" A well-trained geronto-llamacologist will encourage a patient to dig into his past in order to relate to the world around him.

"No. Not gonna finish vegetables. Don't like 'em."

LleMoyne turned and gave me a look. "He's going to be a tough nut to crack."

"Do what you gotta do."

LleMoyne leaned over the bed and said softly "I'll bet you'd like to pet me—wouldn't you?"



McKelvey gave the llama a look of wild surmise, as Cortez's men did when they first saw the Pacific Ocean, as described by Keats in *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*.

"Could I?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course you could . . . llamas feel good," LleMoyne replied.

The old man began to stroke the regal creature, who responded by lowering his neck and nuzzling the patient on the cheeks. "You really need to shave," animal said to man.

"You do too," McKelvey said right back, although his face had softened to a smile. I took the patient's pulse, and his heart rate had slowed to a crawl.

"You've done it!" I exclaimed to the llama, as McKelvey started to munch on yellow beans, cottage cheese and pureed carrots. We're known for our 5-star cuisine.

"It's what I'm trained to do," LleMoyne said as he tried to write out a prescription in his illegible handwriting—even worse than human doctors!

"What's this say?" I asked as I turned the scrip every which way, trying to decipher it.

"Take one llama before every meal," he replied. "And *don't* use the generic stuff."

