

The Importance of Expanding Your Skillset and Working as a Team to Provide Better Care

A Special Interview With Dr. Deirdre Farr

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and Ronnie has nominated Dr. Deirdre Farr as a game changer. And Dr. Farr has joined us today to tell us more about the work that she does with animals. We're so excited to have her. And so Dr. Farr, congratulations on your Game Changer award and welcome.

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Thank you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

For our listeners and readers that haven't maybe visited your website or are not yet clients or don't know much about you, if you would back up and tell us a little bit about what motivated you to become a veterinarian, and then how you decided to add and diversify your toolbox to gain more tools after you graduated from vet school.

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Okay. So as far as deciding to become a veterinarian, it's kind of a little bit of an alternate path there. I originally wanted to go into journalism and worked for a physician, my junior and senior year of high school, in one of those old practices where a 17-year-old could be the office staff.

And I was so impressed with them that I wanted to go to medical school and changed my freshman year of college to – well, my father, it's a funny thing. He had a brother-in-law who was a physician, and he just thought it looked like a terrible life. So he discouraged me from med school. And I thought, “Well, I love animals.” And I was interested in pediatrics and this isn't that different. So, I set my sight on veterinary school and I went to Iowa State Veterinary School and graduated a long time ago.

And honestly, I was burned out by the time I got out of veterinary school. It was the '80s, an agricultural veterinary school was a terrible time to be a veterinary student if you loved animals. I have several friends I've spoken to from veterinary school who burned out right away. Actually one of them became a physical therapist, but I opened way prematurely a small-animal practice. And I owned it for 13 years and I learned a lot, but I was pretty much over it at the end of 13 years.

And I was fortunate enough to sell the practice and my frustrations were running a business. But in addition that I just felt like I didn't have enough tools to – I felt like the tools I had were primitive actually, and especially to treat chronic disease. So, I sold that practice and I was really ready to give up my license and just happened to discover the IVAS (International Veterinary Acupuncture Society) acupuncture course and took it.

And I knew from the beginning I found my niche. So, I started with acupuncture. I continued with Chinese herbal medicine, chiropractic. I opened a small, intimate, complimentary modality practice. That's all I did. I didn't throw away my Western tools because they're important. I just didn't do them. I integrated, I would work with their primary veterinarian or with specialists to give my patients what was best for them.

And so I operated that practice for about 15 years. And then actually I retired in 2019, right before the pandemic. It was just kind of serendipitous timing, but I couldn't give it up altogether. And I had the opportunity to spend one afternoon a week at a colleague's practice where I did the same modalities. And I've been doing that since and I love it. I love it.

And the nice thing about working just that brief amount of time is I have to continue to – it's a motivation to do continuing education. So right now I'm in the middle of the CIVT (College of Integrative Veterinary Therapies) complimentary College of Integrative Veterinary Therapy nutrition course, where I saw your lecture last week on detoxification. And it's an opportunity to always be adding to the information. It's just endless. So, that's kind of my background.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So you really are – I also am a fellow Iowa State grad, but I graduated in '97. And even then, I get the whole agricultural college. I get everything that you have described. You had a much harder road in that you went to, as a female, you went to a male-dominated professional school much earlier than I did. And then graduated just as I felt, not necessarily equipped to deal with any lifestyle chronic degenerative disease process whatsoever.

Also, you then rebuilt yourself with a set of tools that gave you purpose, and meaning, and passion. Was able to reignite you from burnout in a way that allowed you to continue your love, serving the people around you, but in a way that was synergistic to nurturing your soul as well. And that's awesome that you found that. You've spanned this decades of your career, and you're in a really nice place in that you're, I'm going to call it semiretired.

But you've seen a lot in your career, Deirdre. You've seen a lot. Would you say from your vantage point now that your conventional colleagues are more open to referring to you for some of your modalities that they don't practice? How do you feel that the relationship barometer is with your conventional, professional colleagues? Because you have spanned the distance from when people were like, "Oh my gosh, you're a witch doctor." To now you have board-certified specialists referring to you. What are you feeling about that evolution in our profession?

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Well, first of all, very – so, I took that IVAS course in 2002, 2003 and started practicing right away. Since I did these, started with acupuncture and then moved into other complimentary modalities, I was very careful not to step on my colleagues' toes. So, if they needed lab work, I sent them back to their primary veterinarian. I consulted with their primary veterinarian so that we were working as a team rather than against each other. I was always very careful.

Sometimes you're a new convert to something and you start trashing the old thing. And I just said, "I bring one point of view and they bring another and everybody's doing the best they can."

So, I developed a really good working relationship with my colleagues. Initially, I don't think they believed in it at all, but what they started doing is sending me the things where they dead-ended, these terminal cancer patients.

And they said, "I'll just send them to Deirdre. Send them to Dr. Farr." And the thing is I could do something with them. I had something I could offer them that couldn't be offered through what they did. So eventually, first of all, there have been a number of practitioners who didn't believe in this at first and are now taking complimentary medicine courses. And I think, I don't take total credit, but I think because I tried very hard not to alienate people and they saw their patients back. I didn't take away their patients. They saw back and they saw the improvements. And so I think it was kind of a catalyst for them to do the same thing. See that it's not in either or proposition. I just tell people it's just other tools, get as many tools as you can.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's beautiful. It's beautiful. And really you've made it a central goal to work, as you said, to build a team of health care practitioners, all working in your individual lanes, with what your passion is, working together, to help stimulate a functional healing response in all your patients. But that means that you are also then quietly role-modeling what you're doing to your other colleagues that say, "Oh my gosh, the patient isn't dead yet. Oh my gosh, they're getting better." And you don't actually have to say anything at that point. The patient does all of the explaining, which is wonderful. Yeah. What do you love most about the work that you do?

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Well, the thing I love most is doing this kind of medicine I learned what I didn't learn as a Western medicine practitioner, that this holistic approach and by holistic – first of all, you're not taking the body apart and saying, "Oh, these are the lungs. And this is digestive tract." You're looking at the whole patient. And not only physically, but honestly, emotionally and spiritually. And you see all that.

And I always want to know what's going on at home with my clients because it has so much to do with what I'm seeing with my patient. And I would say dogs in particular are just emotional sponges. And then I'm also – what I love most is I'm a team. It isn't a client, me doing something for their patient, but the client and I, and the patient are all a team. And we're just working for that patient's well-being, whatever that looks like.

Sometimes it's a palliative well-being. It's not a win-or-lose thing. It's just doing the best for that patient, where they are, and also utilizing the client to do that. Because the people who come to me, I always say this, and I have a very – because it's all I do, I have a very unique clientele. These are people who already know their pet well, who are already well-read, they go to the internet, but they don't – they always a check it with me what they've seen on the internet.

But they're already on board. They're wanting to do the best for their pet and they're coming to me for that. So I just love that kind of team approach. And also just I see my patients totally differently than I used to. I don't know how to explain it, but they're just emotional, spiritual beings, rather than a car where I have to work on the various parts.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. It's beautiful. You are still in practice, which is beautiful. And I would assume, probably, that you'll see some patients, like me, we'll see patients forever until we physically can't anymore because it's in our souls to want to do what we can to help the animals around us. If you could tell the world one thing or let the world know one thing about what you've learned so far, or your observations thus far in life. Dr. Farr, what would it be?

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

So this is kind of on a more global scale. I thought about this. It's be nice. Just be nice. And that is true in my professional life, as well as in the rest of my life, my nonprofessional life. I have clients tell me all the time, I'm in Des Moines. So Des Moines, it's a city, but it's a small enough city that you run into clients in the grocery store and things like that. Or they'll come back with another pet after they've lost a pet and they'll remind me of something I did and to tell me how much it meant.

And I don't even remember doing it. I don't think of it as something at the time that's particularly being nice. And in my nonprofessional life too, you just never know what kind of impact being kind is going to do. And so I just think that's my one takeaway altogether, is just both in personal and professional life. Be nice.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. And doesn't the world need my goodness. Especially at this time/space reality, we are in a kindness deficit. And so that those are very wise, important words, especially right now. Dr. Farr, if people wanted to – I'm also born and raised in Iowa. If we have Iowans-

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Really?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. I was born and raised in Cedar Falls. If we have Iowans that are looking for integrative services or would like to know more about what you do, is there a website or how would people go about contacting you?

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Currently, I'm working at Iowa Veterinary Wellness Clinic, it's an integrative practice, but they very much have a more holistic bend and they're in Beaverdale. And I don't know if you want a phone number. I can I give you the phone number, but it's Iowa Veterinary Wellness Center.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Perfect. Perfect. I am so thankful that Ronnie took the time to nominate you as a Game Changer.

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Yeah, I'll have to thank her.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes. Wonderful. And this is such a great opportunity for me to get to know some of my amazing colleagues better. I appreciate your incredible vast contribution to the field of veterinary medicine in Iowa, the motherland, as I say. I appreciate you not burning out and quitting, but instead realizing that you need to expand your tool belt with a variety of tools that not just nourish your soul and allow you to practice without burnout, but provide such a gift to the community around you. So thank you for everything you're doing and congratulations on your Game Changer award.

Dr. Deirdre Farr:

Thank. Okay. Thank you very much.