

Evolving Into an Integrative Practice in the Veterinary World:

An Interview With Dr. Steve Marsden

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

I'm interested in just having conversations with integrative veterinarians about how they became who they are and why that has mattered to them, not only in terms of the quality of the practice, but themselves. You appear to not be burned out and you have two active practices, and you're doing a lot of other things, and there's a reason for that. So my goal is for conventional vets who watch this, that they can see that there's hope beyond the four years that we graduated from veterinary school, if they're interested in expanding their viewpoint. That's the goal.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Right. I would agree that although it may not be – well, let's just say that when I did regular medicine, I became disillusioned, dissatisfied, and I remember telling myself, back in my mid-thirties that I would probably just practice until I was in my mid-forties, make what I could and then retire and go redeem myself somewhere else, doing something else.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Looking back, I can tell I never would have made it to my mid-forties, and so moving in this direction definitely took that away from me. I was burned out in practice and so I can assert that going into complementary medicine, for some people, will be what they're looking for in terms of revitalizing the interest in their career, getting rid of, let's see, expression, compassion fatigue, depression, that kind of thing.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

There are a lot of possible fields that veterinarians could go into, where they could expect some relief just because as soon as you create a filter between yourself and the clientele who are bothering you or the work environment that is bothering you, then you make things better.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

But the holistic medicine has the added advantage of not just being a filter through which clients run or that determines a certain type of practice environment. Holistic medicine also just has much more gratifying outcomes and the type of work that I do is much more what I was shooting for. My idealistic self when I was a kid, what I imagined that I would be able to do for people and for their animals, holistic medicine gives me that. Conventional medicine did not. That was where my crisis came from. Go ahead.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's beautifully said. And ladies and gentlemen, this is Dr. Steve Marsden, giving his insights into his evolution to becoming an integrative practitioner. Steve, knowing that you knew the type of healer you wanted to be as a kid and then going to veterinary school – Dr. Marsden is also licensed for people, so he has a thriving human practice and he has a thriving veterinary practice, so he can literally treat the whole family.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But you didn't come out of either one of those medical school backgrounds probably knowing the practice that you would have now. So there was a little bit of an evolution there. Was it out of your burnout that you decided to acquire more skills, or how did that come about?

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Yeah. It's a funny thing, but within a few weeks of graduation, the one thing I feared the most that I would somehow harm or injure an animal with medicine as a result of me doing the wrong thing, or in my case, there was a typo in a textbook that led me to give a wrong drug dose. That was my worst fear, doing some harm. And my greatest hope was that at some point in my career, somebody would think I was God's gift to medicine. And within two weeks I'd accomplished both. And I can remember, I was working in a small country practice at the time and I was thinking to myself, as I was unlocking the door, coming back from a farm round, I was thinking, "Is that it? Is everything else just filling in between these two spectrums, the worst situation, the best situation, everything else is just somewhere in the middle?"

Dr. Steve Marsden:

It felt like my career was looking a little empty in terms of gratification. Nevertheless, I soldiered on, I've got student loans to pay, and was brand new in a career yet to unfold. But within a few years, I was definitely disillusioned. Why was I disillusioned? Because there were a lot of animals that I just didn't really fully understand what was going on. And of course, diagnosis is the cornerstone to effect a treatment. If you can't understand the patient, then how are you going to effectively treat them? So sometimes, they didn't fit into the nice little pigeonholes that we have in conventional medicine. They just didn't fit a diagnosis.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Sometimes what would happen is I would know from a textbook perspective what the problem was, but I still couldn't explain everything, and that really annoyed me. I'm a pathological Virgo. We just have to have explanations for everything. We're analysts. Analysts. For example, if somebody says, "Oh, my dog coughs every morning at 3:00 AM, why is that, doctor?" And I didn't have an answer. I guess a lot of people can just let that go, or say, "I don't know," and put the thought out of their mind, but to my mind, if I couldn't answer that question, then I didn't fully understand the case. And if I didn't fully understand the case then there's a good chance that my treatment outcomes were going to be less than desirable.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So that was the first thing. I couldn't necessarily fully understand some of these patients. And the second thing that really bugged me was when I could understand them and I gave them treatments that were in the textbooks, I would find that sometimes, often the treatment was worse than the cure. Of course, we have different drugs now than we did 30 years ago, but still, we have a lot of the same drugs and they're out there and those same drugs are causing the same level of problems. One that springs to mind, a dog with discoid lupus, just a young dog. And of course, the textbooks at the time said high doses of corticosteroids as an immune suppressant. We didn't have cyclosporin, we didn't have azathioprine, and we didn't have a lot of the other later immune-suppressing drugs. We just had corticosteroids.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So I put the dog on corticosteroids and the high dose, and the nose got a lot better, but the dog sure didn't. It went into a progressive wasting stage, and it was a young dog. And I thought, "God, this is just not sustainable." And the owner thought that too. So she weaned the dog off the corticosteroids and got herself some vitamin E. Vitamin E topically, vitamin E orally, treated her dog. This was the days before

internet too. So kudos to women back then. It was usually women who were somehow researching treatments, even in the absence of the internet.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

And she came up with vitamin E. She applied it topically, she gave to her dog orally, nose healed up fantastically. And she brought that dog in to see me. Now my response was what I hope that every veterinarian's response would be, which is, "Oh, thank goodness you found a solution other than corticosteroids." But a lot of times, veterinarians feel threatened by results that owners get using their own intellect, their own resources, their own research. And if I was ever that practitioner, I would definitely know that I needed a career change because my heart was in the wrong place.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Anyway, I'm grateful that I had a parade of clients at that time in my life, constantly asking me about, "What do you think about vanadium for my diabetic cat? What do you think about this? What do you think about that?" Because at some point, I just thought, "Okay, some of this stuff is outlandish. I just need to go look this up." There was no internet. We didn't even have bookstores back then. My God, how the world has changed.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So I went to the library. A rather archaic thing to do, but that's where I went. I found a book talking about various holistic therapies, read up on them. Yes, some of them sounded completely ludicrous. Started putting the book back on a shelf and then I snatched it back and looked because on one of the pages was the most preposterous thing, which for my mind was homeopathy. It said, "Oh, and by the way, veterinarians in the U.K. are using this to treat," and then they listed every single thing that bugged me as a practitioner, that I felt ill-equipped to treat. And that grabbed my attention because U.K. vets, they're no slouches, there's a rigorous academic career there. It's one thing for Joe Public to get temporarily hoodwinked by Dr. Google, but it's another, for somebody who's gone to that kind of rigor, to look at something that sounds illogical and still decide to use it and get good results.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

I felt that at that point it behooved me to look into it. Whereas when I'd made that decision, I was fighting against every single bias that my teachers had dutifully put into my brain during my conventional training. They knew enough to know that alternative medicine was coming. And they said, "Don't go there. It's hogwash." So I started to explore it despite that advice. And it took me a couple of years of messing around, and in that messing around, there's a lot of disappointments because there were no veterinarians doing this to learn from. It was just me out there in the wilds of Canada. But I eventually started to get results, long story short. And once that happened, and once I saved my first life with holistic medicine, I knew there was a gigantic hole in my training and I had to get out there and fill it.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So I had to inquire for more information from what was then called the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Oregon, just about homeopathy. And they sent me their whole syllabus. And I looked at that syllabus, and I thought, "Wow, in another life this would have been a good idea." But then there's that little voice. You've probably heard that voice too. And it said, "Well, you can still do it. It's expensive, but you own a clinic." And I had run this clinic for about five years and I used to joke that I was getting rich off my own failures because I would not be able to get these animals better and they'd have to keep coming back every few weeks. And I didn't like that feeling. It felt like the profession and me lacked integrity.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So, I thought for a very brief period of time, but then I thought "I've got to go do this." So I sold my clinic at fire sale prices, got me enough to move down to Oregon and then I jumped into the full-on human training. My thinking, there was, number one, there weren't the resources that veterinarians have now, but number two of my thinking was they sue people in the States, so they probably do a good job of training them so they don't get sued. And so, going to a human medical college in Oregon just made sense.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

That was a long answer to your question. So be forewarned, anytime you asked me a question, settle in for 10 minutes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

No, that's excellent. But, Steve, backtrack and talk to me about when you – because I had the same conventional approach. I had my introduction. My exposure to integrative medicine was prior to veterinary school, and I knew I would come out being an integrative practitioner. So I went in asking about arnica and all sorts of things that you just weren't supposed to do. And I also was given that exact same response that, "That is not medicine. You're dabbling in unscientific matters, that actually not only increases your liability as a practitioner, but it causes you to look uncredentialed, uneducated and potentially minimizes or decreases the validity of being a real veterinarian. So just don't go there."

Dr. Karen Becker:

In this week of interviewing integrative veterinarians, one of the conversations I want to have is, because our option is euthanasia, as conventional veterinarians, if we don't start adding lifestyle tools to our toolbox. As veterinarians, we're great at treating infectious disease and trauma medicine, but when it comes to fixing our patients, especially of weird and wonky symptoms, like the cough at 3:00 AM, we didn't get that training. So unless we go out and look outside the box, we don't have that training, which I think can lead to professional desperation, depression, anxiety and lack of enjoyment doing what we're doing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But then if we go out and dabble or inquire about learning outside of veterinary school, there's a lot of criticism. Other veterinarians especially will criticize us as not being scientific. There's an argument right now going on between conventional doctors and integrative doctors. And it makes me sad because integrative medicine fills this gigantic gap prior to euthanasia, that currently, conventional medicine doesn't have any resources for. So it doesn't seem like there should be an argument at all, and yet there is. Do you see this potentially resolving over the next 50 to a hundred years, and if so, or if not, what can we do to facilitate a better conversation of acceptance for both of these really important viewpoints towards medicine?

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Sorry, I lost you there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Oh, okay. I'm not sure at what point I cut out. My question to you is there seems to be a dispute within the medical community. Can you hear me now?

Dr. Karen Becker:

I think we're frozen.

Michael:

Yeah, he looks frozen there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Will you also do me a favor, Michael and just email Dr. Neil, and say that I'm with Dr. Marsden for just a few more minutes?

Michael:

Yep. Already did.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay, awesome. Thank you. Let me see. Oh, are you back? Hi.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

I'm back. You just froze up there, when you were talking about veterinarians being in this position of having to choose between practicing their conscience as it were, and practicing the profession's conscience or they're following the dogma of the profession. So that's where you were headed. I didn't actually get to the question.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay. So being that, from my vantage point, there's this gap. I was well-trained with conventional medicine in some aspects, infectious disease, trauma medicine, but then there's a lot that with lifestyle related-diseases or environmental diseases, or even the weird and wonky cases like the cough at 3 o'clock in the morning, I graduated not prepared to treat many of the cases I was seeing, and I felt vulnerable and I didn't feel qualified as a practitioner until like you, I could go and receive additional training that allowed me to at least offer some other resources to my clients.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I felt really empowered that I had other things to offer and yet my conventional colleagues didn't necessarily see it as additional gifts we could be giving our clients. There seems to be some confrontation between accepting integrative medicine and what it can offer, never in place of conventional medicine, but in addition to, to make a whole system of medicine and provide tools and resources for patients that we didn't learn about in veterinary school. When veterinarians step out to receive additional training, they are not always met or well-received from their conventional colleagues. Do you see, Steve, that this is shifting for the better? That we're beginning to become more open-minded and have better dialogue with our conventional colleagues, or not? And if not, what could we be doing to facilitate acceptance of both of these systems of medicine being incredibly important, to not only heal our patients, but to keep them in a state of balance and health throughout their lifetime?

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Right. I definitely felt stigmatized when I first went in this direction, by the veterinarians who used to know me here in Edmonton and saw me go and take off to Oregon to study God knows what. Yeah, I was very aware of how they felt about me.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

I do think the situation has improved because back then, even I was thinking that there was a paucity of research to support the directions that I wanted to move in. And no matter how much a veterinarian views themselves as science-based, everybody knows there's a lot more science supporting these therapies than there used to be. So, that argument just doesn't even wash anymore.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Now the argument is, "Well, what about the quality of the science?" Well, research is like a layer cake. So the base level of research is a case series, which you have to go out there and try things in order to establish. And the base level of the cake, even below that, is bench studies and just laboratory research that supports the case series. And then on top of the case series you get clinical trials, and then there are randomized clinical trials and their systematic reviews.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So everybody feels like if something's worth its salt, it should be shown in a randomized clinical trial. It takes time and energy, and resources, and initiative, and numbers to get to the top of that cake. So I see it as a convenient defense that probably people throw out there if what they're really saying is they just don't want to look at this. But for those of us who are in integrative medicine, we do see this as a process that is unfolding. And the idea that science doesn't support what we're doing is just not true. It's not a scientific opinion, ironically.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

The other thing I would say is that this apparent war between conventional colleagues and holistic colleagues, it's not really taking place because 90% of veterinarians who do integrative medicine do it 10% of the time. So what happens is in people's clinics, there's a hat switching. You've got an integrative medicine hat, you take that off because now you've got a conventional case, put your conventional hat on, take that off, put your integrative medicine hat on. So there's a lot of hat switching going on and there are very few practitioners like you and me, who are really spending far more of their time doing things integratively. And even then, like I said, there is a science base behind what we do.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So I feel like the little concern is slowly going away. There's one other thing that I point out sometimes when I'm teaching other veterinarians to do this in conferences, webinars, is I remind them of what Stephen Hawking, a phrase that he had coined, which was model-dependent realism. So what he fully acknowledged, what any physicist will acknowledge is there are two reigning models in physics, and at as yet they're essentially separate. One is the quantum model, one is the Newtonian model. They can't fully be reconciled, but we know they're both correct. How do you know they're both correct? Because you can form a hypothesis and you can test it, and you can have each model validated. But we can take that same idea of model-dependent realism and you can bring it to medicine. So if we're bringing it to medicine, how do we test a medical hypothesis? Well, you, you test it when you diagnose a patient and then the experiment is when you treat on that basis. And when you say in advance what things you think are going to get better, when they get better, your model has been validated.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Well, we can't just do that for conventional medicine. We can do it for Chinese medicine. I can make a Chinese medical diagnosis. I could say these are all the things that support it. Here's the treatment that I'm going to give for that pattern. And when it works, the model will be validated. Of course, there'll be conventional medical reasons why it worked as well, but the model will be validated.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So Hawking never felt that we should be so audacious as to say there's only one truth and it's science and everything else isn't. He felt there were multiple truths out there, to the extent that you could hypothesize, test and support, that was a truth that you were working with. And so when we take that lens and we apply it to what we're doing as integrated practitioners, we are very scientific.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good. And it's such a great analogy. Really, really good. I also feel that, I do think that the younger, the next generation of veterinarians are approaching medicine just naturally more open mindedly. They're open to having conversations that potentially older generations of vets wouldn't, couldn't even entertain. Younger veterinarians are doing a fantastic job of when they have questions, respectfully asking them, so that we can begin a dialogue. And that's incredibly, I think promising for medicine across the board, really.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

I do admire people who realized that this was a promising area, even in spite of what they heard in their education, that they came up with the idea while they were getting educated, before getting educated. I admire you for having that kind of insight. I needed to be bludgeoned by life to change my opinion. So I'm always impressed by people who come out of the gate knowing that what they're learning in vet school is just not sufficient.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I think that I can thank my parents, my family for growing up in a very proactive household. In one way, the strike against me is that I grew up thinking that all families lived proactively and food was always at the center of healing, and that we would start with nature first and then move up the toxicity scale with potentially using drugs that had more side effects, where we could start with minimal side-effect remedies or solutions. That seemed just common sense to me. I realize now that that is not necessarily how everyone views health recovery, disease and healing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So I'm thankful I came out of a very proactive home. I do love talking to practitioners who not only didn't realize that there was other ways of healing, but that I love looking at everyone's diversified paths and how they ended up where they've ended up. And oftentimes I think for veterinarians they end up at burnout, and then they end up rebuilding themselves and then also their practice based on a sturdier, broader perspective that can withstand the test of time without depression or burnout or anxiety.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And it feels to me like many doctors end up hitting bottom and then rebuilding themselves on a platform that is more sustainable, but also kinder to themselves and potentially to their patients and I think having a discussion about that with every veterinary who will listen, I think we've all been in situations where the more we can discuss this as healers, but also as pet parents ourselves. The bigger discussion we can have, the more we can remove any barriers or concerns or maybe fears that we can all bring to the table.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So I appreciate all of the education you do, both to pet parents and to other veterinarians to provide opportunities for veterinarians to learn. Steve, if you could summarize any thought or idea or tidbit of knowledge to not only veterinarians but potentially also pet parents. What would you like veterinarians and pet parents to think about, or know, or feel, or see?

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Right. I don't know. A few things. I guess the first thing would be that diet is everything. Diet underpins health, no matter what model you're going to use to eventually try to get there another way, it's the foundation for any effective treatment, be it conventional, Chinese, medical, et cetera. Well, fortunately dietary intervention is the one thing that both conventional and integrative veterinarians can agree upon, and that owners can see the sense of too.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

The question then is, "How do we define a healthy diet?" There's a lot of nutritional research that does not get packaged and put out to my conventional colleagues because it doesn't necessarily support the product line that company is selling, and it's usually a company that's putting that information out there. So veterinarians need to expand their knowledge base to fully deploy diets to pets' advantages, so medical research databases, like PubMed and stuff. That's where I get my information, and that's what helps me understand when I see a real food diet get an animal better.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

But we can definitely say that for a large portion of animals, real food diets are the way to go. And the kinder they are to the animal, in terms of keeping insulin levels low, the more unprocessed they are, the better that animal's going to do, regardless of what gets tried. So that's an inconvenient truth for owners. They don't want to hear that.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So, one of the things that I tell owners is that you need to know that if you decide not to use a real food diet out of convenience, seldom is, it makes sense financially because you're just going to go to the veterinarian more if you feed your animal out of a can of dog food or a bag of cat food. So it's not a financial decision, although you might think it is. But it is a convenience decision. So you need to know that you have your convenience or the ease of your existence on a balance with your animal's well-being, and you need to decide where, for you, that tradeoff is. But I find that once I put the things in that context then owners are much more ready to try real food diets because they don't want to convenience themselves and do harm to their animals.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So real food diets need to be implemented. We need to leverage the fact that a lot of conventional veterinarians embrace real food diets, if not all of them. And that's a great place to start those conversations that you were talking about.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

I would say for veterinarians who are burned out, anxious and depressed, they should look at holistic medicine in two ways. Number one, as a potential avenue for exploration. And you don't need to get religion like I did to plunge in. There are webinars, various system-based webinars like, "Here's how you treat renal failure. Here's how you treat liver disease," offered by colleges like CIVT (College of Integrative Veterinary Therapies). They take two hours, they tell you exactly what to do, what to look for in very conventional terms, so that you can – sorry, I've got some noise there. Let me just disconnect that somehow.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

What was I saying there? Oh yeah. So veterinarians who are nosing around this stuff and are feeling depressed and anxious, they should look at integrative medicine in two ways. Number one, avail

themselves of those short, easy-to-understand, but still very effective treatment recommending modules, offered by places like CIVT.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

The second thing is they should consider trying a holistic medicine for themselves and feeling its effects on their bodies, feeling how it can change their stress level, their depression. We tend to think of the brain when we're dealing with depression and anxiety and compassion fatigue that there's some part of us that's broken, and unfortunately therefore a self-talk doesn't work because self-talk has to come from the thing that it's broken, and we end up with this vicious circle concept of when we're feeling depressed and anxious. How do we ever get out of those eddies?

Dr. Steve Marsden:

But from a Chinese point of view, how we think and how we feel, the brain is just part of a community. If you just make the community better by how you're eating, by getting out in nature, doing some exercise, by trying some herbs, trying some acupuncture, trying some yoga, just trying to try these on for themselves, what they will find is they feel better. And then they don't need studies to tell them they should go into this. They have their own physical well-being as a barometer of that.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

So this used to be a leap of faith, but now it's not a leap of faith. Now it's just, they can baby step their way into it.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yep. That's really good, common sense, wise advice. Very, very good. As always, I appreciate your insights and your expertise. You bring a lot of wisdom and value. To end, as a bridge builder between the conventional and integrative doctor community, you're doing an exceptional job of providing tools and resources to veterinarians looking for more options, but also hope to pet parents that feel like there aren't any options. Everything that you are doing, knitting together both of these communities is effective, and I'm so thankful for the role that you're playing in that. So thank you for joining me today.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Thank you very much. It's been an honor. I would repeat your words right back at you. So it's been an honor to be part of your project. I hope the right ears hear it.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Thank you, Dr. Marsden.

Dr. Steve Marsden:

Okay. Bye.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Bye.

Integrating Physical Rehabilitation for Dogs and Cats: An Interview With Dr. Tanya Grantham

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and as a part of our Integrative Veterinary Awareness Week, I have a fantastic integrative veterinarian from South Africa with me, Dr. Tanya Grantham. And thank you, Dr. Tanya, for joining me.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

Thank you, Dr. Karen. It's really a pleasure and an honor.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's so exciting. So tell our viewers and listeners or readers a little bit about what inspired you to become a veterinarian and your evolution after veterinary school into the really unique type of practice that you're in right now.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

Okay. So I was growing up on a farm in Africa. I had a farm in Africa and I was 5 years old and I rescued a lizard from the dogs. And when my father came home that night, I said to him, "I'm going to be a vet." And so the next 20 years of my life was spent fulfilling that dream. And when I left vet school, I moved into or started working in a conventional small animal veterinary practice, which I worked at and then owned for a total of 13 years.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

During sort of the last three years, my own health took a turn for the worst and it prompted me to sell, which got me into the integrative stuff. But prior to that, I'd been doing a number of surgeries on my patients, mostly dogs and some of the medial patellas repaired well. Others didn't. Same with the cruciates. Same with the hips. And so I started to question, "Why did some recover and some didn't? Number one. And number two, how could I improve the outcome for more of my patients?"

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

So I'd already started to investigate hydrotherapy, so that was sort of the late 1990s and rehabilitation or physical rehabilitation was really starting in the Northern Hemisphere at that stage. And so that's how I got into them signing up at the University of Tennessee. And the rest is history. Once I sold my practice and once I was healed, and I am, thank you. I'm very grateful for that, I opened a physical rehabilitation facility for dogs and cats. That's where I am now.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So interesting. So first of all, good for you. Sometimes the universe deals us physical issues that force us to stop and address our own health. I'm thankful that you took the time that you needed to physically recover. I think oftentimes, especially veterinarians, we oftentimes deny our own well-being, our own physical, emotional or spiritual well-being because we just don't think that there's time, but really how

effective of a healer can we be if we ourselves aren't necessarily healed? So good for you for focusing on yourself and making sure that you are in a state to be able to continue on. That's awesome.

Dr. Karen Becker:

When you were first investigating physical therapy, and this is something that I find interesting in the human realm. If humans undergo knee surgery or hip surgery, physical therapy is not just automatic. We know that it helps with pain, it improves outcomes and improves the long-term well-being and health span. Why do you think it is, Tanya, that that's not necessarily the case in veterinary medicine? I feel like there could be a little bit of a gap between veterinarians understanding the depth and breadth of how important physical therapy is, not just post-surgery, but as a modality for dramatically improving health and well-being.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

Yeah, it's a very good question and a very valid one. Firstly, I think as western veterinarians, we want research and we want what we prescribe to our pet parents or for our patients to be proven. And the research is coming for physiotherapy and the effects of physical therapy in the animal realm. But 20 years ago it wasn't there and there's still not the same amount of research available in the animal realm as in the human realm. So I think that's often what I hear, "Oh, but there's no proof."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Interesting.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

The moment you go, "But it's been proven in human therapies," "No, they're not the same." So I'm not certain, I think unless you've been exposed to the effects of physiotherapy, I don't think you're necessarily aware of it. Unless you are an athlete, I also don't think you're necessarily aware of the benefits of movement and exercise and how badly you're affected when you are not mobile. And I think the same applies to our animal companions.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

And thirdly, I think that there is an element of – well, there is an element of not knowing, so the information is not being distributed adequately or there's not enough of it. And because our colleagues don't know, I think there's a fear factor as well, like, "Will it work? What if I look like a fool if I prescribe this?" So I think that's a whole element on its own as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

When I went to veterinary school 25 years ago, they talked about exercise being important. But at least just in terms of what I can recall, I didn't have specific guidelines about how much exercise, what type of exercise. They generally said, of course, diet and nutrition, exercise are important for managing primarily weight, is what I was taught 25 years ago, but there's so much more to that. What has the reception been when you started your practice focusing on maintaining the musculoskeletal health, but also managing pain, a massive issue in and of itself? Has your reception been warm in your environment or what's the temperature of the veterinarians understanding really the depth and breadth of what you're doing in South Africa?

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

Yeah, so the response is, I mean, I officially opened this practice in 2009, so it's going on for 12 years and it's in the same area in which I have my own practice. So I made very certain that I didn't do any standard

veterinary work when I opened. So I was not to be viewed as a competitor. And most of my patients at that time actually came from word of mouth and from my past clients. I made it a policy to communicate with my colleagues. Every time I saw a patient, I found out from which practice it originated and I sent them an email or I phoned them. And then after six to eight weeks, I sent them a progress report.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

And gradually with time, there's been, I would say more than maybe 60%, 65% of the vets are now open to me prescribing physical rehabilitation and pain management. Some of them are still a bit skeptical about acupuncture. But now more of my referrals come from vets than they do from word of mouth. Over a decade it's changed.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's super inspiring for me to hear. That's one of my goals, of this Awareness Week, is to offer conventional vets who maybe have apprehensions or don't even know about the amazing things that integrative medicine can offer. And, and really physical therapy or physio isn't – I mean, physio to me is just kind of a, I don't want to say mandatory, but it's something that I feel so strongly about in terms of dramatically improving health span and potentially lifespan. So talk to me a little bit about what your passion is right now. Would you say that as a professional you have evolved over the last decade as you opened your practice or where is your passion flowing right now?

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

Absolutely. It's certainly not what I anticipated for the 20 years that I worked towards becoming a vet. And even when I qualified, my driving forces then when I was younger, was “I really want to make the animals feel better.” And that hasn't changed. That is still fundamental. But what I've discovered after spending 30 to 45 minutes with patients and clients repeatedly, regularly, once a week, twice a week, is that I have a passion for empowering people and I really would like them to be informed. I firmly believe that the more information we have, the more options we have, the more likely it is, the more empowered we definitely feel, but the more likely it is that we're going to make a decision that suits us as a family or as a person and my animal, my companion or my pet that fills the role within that family.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

It's incredible how many – I mean, I think intervertebral disc disease is always controversial and we have a situation here where often the clients find me quite by accident and they have been given an option of surgery or euthanasia and neither one of those is palatable to them as the parent. They find me. I would say in 80% of those cases we get a result. Does the dog walk perfectly? No, not always, but we manage pain and the dog is functional and the dog is still very much a part of the family. And so it's education on the level of the public and the pet-owning public and it's education on the level of my colleagues. That's really, I think that's my driving force at the moment.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good. And you know what I'm hearing you say, Tanya, is that communication, how you started your practice to try and manage apprehensions from your colleagues is excellent, clear, direct communication, and your passion still is excellent, clear, compassionate communication that facilitates a knowledge base that empowers owners to make good decisions through having enough knowledge outside of maybe what they knew was available. So you're providing this tremendous resource. In terms of you fulfilling your passion, in addition to communication and establishing those relationships with your clients, talk to me a little bit about purpose.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

That's way bigger than being a vet. My purpose every single day is to be the best version of me that I can be. And if that means assisting however many patients through my doors with the humans who also come through my doors, then that is it. And it will all return to me because ultimately we're all connected. And that connection, whatever I do that is the best version of me goes out into the universe and we all are one, it's going to come back. It is my purpose. Every single day I get up and I say, "What am I going to do today? I'm going to make a difference." And then I get up and go out there and do the best I can.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good. So good. And would you say, if you could depart one idea or thought or insight to both the veterinarians around you, conventional or integrative or otherwise, to the other professionals or to pet parents, Tanya, what would you like to share?

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

I think to the vets out there, I would like to say that moving into this sphere following on from my illness has allowed me to manage my time in terms of appointments. It has given me more fulfillment than I thought possible and I'm still doing what essentially fundamentally I wanted to do, which was help animals. When we are living in an era of compassion fatigue and burnout and all of those new age diseases, if you like, the more you can diversify and the more you have available to you, the greater your range and the range of your choices, and therefore you're less likely to actually falter.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good. So good, and so true. You are providing good insights because you have learned them through your own personal trials and tribulations. But out of that, you have carved out a niche that allows you to care for yourself well, but obviously care for your patients and their family units as well. So what you're doing is inspirational, incredibly important. And I hope that the people listening and reading about what you're doing can recognize this incredible value and necessary need for not only movement therapy, but for making sure that you're in a space as a practitioner to be able to best be of service to those around you. And it looks like you've done that exceptionally well. I appreciate you sharing your insights with us.

Dr. Tanya Grantham:

Thank you. Thank you very much, Dr. Karen. It's been a pleasure.

Transitioning From Conventional Practice to Integrative Veterinary Medicine: An Interview With Dr. Neal Sivula By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and joining me today to help me celebrate Integrative Veterinary Medicine Awareness Week is Dr. Neal Sivula. Dr. Neal, thank you so much for joining me.

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Oh, you're very welcome.

Dr. Karen Becker:

You know, talk to me a little bit about your evolution into integrative medicine. Undoubtedly when you graduated from veterinary school, you probably didn't have any integrative modalities that you had learned about yet. Maybe you had, but most of us didn't. So talk to me a little bit about how you were introduced to integrative medicine.

Dr. Neal Sivula:

You bet. No, you're correct that we didn't have any experience with that sort of thing in school. I started having, like a lot of veterinarians who get introduced to integrative medicine, I had some personal health problems. I had some back pain from a previous surgery and some knee pain from running, and while I was an intern at the University of Minnesota, our health insurance covered acupuncture. And that was a long time ago, but I got introduced to a wonderful physician who was trained in acupuncture, and he started treating me and loaned me some textbooks, and it just took off from there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, interesting. I think along with that has to come a spirit of curiosity, or at least a little bit of – because I grew up in Iowa where I had never even heard of acupuncture till my teens, and then I thought it was very interesting. But I think the difference between wanting to pursue something and instantly judging it as being wonky or weird is just that spirit of curiosity. So after you learned about acupuncture, you probably got certified, I'm assuming. And then did you start incorporating acupuncture into practice right away?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

It took a while to get certified. I was doing my internship and my residency and there was, fortunately for me, there was a senior veterinary student at the time whose father was a pretty well-known veterinary acupuncturist in Minnesota at the time. And so they gave me a little guidance and I did a lot of reading. There wasn't a lot, there was just starting to come out a few published articles in the literature, and so I kind of did a lot of reading on my own and fooled around, and I was able to experiment a little bit on donation patients that we had in the clinic, horses with founder and chronic respiratory issues. And so it took some time for me to get through my residency and out into practice before I eventually started, actually I started with chiropractic certification course first and then did acupuncture right after.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And Neil, what was the barometer of your colleagues watching you? Because of course you came out of school quite conventionally trained like we all were. Your colleagues who you worked with, were they interested? Were they skeptical? What were your peers' responses to your additional training that you were receiving?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Actually, I was quite fortunate in that the faculty at Minnesota, at the vet school at the time was really supportive and I didn't have any discouragement, and a couple of faculty members are actually interested. And so we do our resident presentations, and I'd always if I had a chance I can talk about acupuncture or integrative medicine and that was pretty well-received.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow, that's fantastic. With the dozen or so other colleagues, other practitioners who I've interviewed, it's been kind of a mixed response. Some people have had a lot of colleagues who have been quite critical, and several people have kind of sailed through in their careers with full support, which has just been fantastic to hear. I think that there's definitely been a shift in people's acceptance of recognizing that we didn't learn everything that we possibly needed to know in those eight, or in your situation maybe 10 or 12 years. So that's refreshing to hear. So first came chiropractic and then acupuncture, and you started instituting both of those right away. Did you graduate and go into mixed animal practice? You see dogs and cats and horses, or what type of practice did you enter into?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Well, I finished my residency and went out into private practice in Minnesota, and equine practice, and practiced there a few years. And that was before I became certified, and I just didn't have time to get certified at the time. When I moved home back to Ohio here a few years later and started my own practice, a large animal practice, a mobile practice, and started doing chiropractic and acupuncture with my patients. And then there was a well-timed article in Dog Fancy magazine about dog chiropractic, and clients started calling, wondering if I could work on their dogs. And so started eventually adding in a little bit of small animal integrative medicine into my practice, and then eventually after a couple of years was able to, fortunately enough for me, changed my practice to entirely integrative medicine.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow. And so what are the types of patients, Neil, that you see now? Talk to me a little bit, what does your day look like as an integrative practitioner?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

You bet. I've transitioned, just for time, away from large animals right now, and for the last 10 years or so. And so I have a small brick-and-mortar clinic and we do integrative medicine for small animals only. Most of our patients are geriatric, and we love that. We love encouraging human/animal bond, and being involved in a lot of important decisions for our clients, and helping them with their older patients. So our practice, I'm a solo doctor, we have five technical staff. We use an underwater treadmill. Most of our practice is acupuncture, chiropractic and herbal medicine. We have a Reiki practitioner who comes in, we do a lot of massage on our patients as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And would you say that you have people coming both bringing healthy seniors, being proactive and wanting to keep their seniors in geriatric healthy, or would you say the bulk of your practice is animals that are broken, that they're trying to patch up and fix?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Certainly my started like everybody else's, I think, who does integrative medicine where you get that patient who's been through a number of veterinarians and you're their last hope. I've been fortunate enough to be doing this long enough now that we've got clients who I've known for 15 years, and they see the benefits of what we do. And so we're seeing them earlier and earlier in the process, and so maybe they'll bring their new pet in for a wellness exam, and we're involved kind of every step of the way. So probably at this stage we're probably more still leaning toward patients who are in the later stages of their disease, but we do have an increasing frequency of healthier older patients who are coming in for maintenance work as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. And that, to me, that's the same as my practice and my career. And I would say that what's so inspiring to me about this shift is that, because people are recognizing the benefits of integrative medicine, and because I think the millennials and younger people are recognizing, "Hey, there's a place for this," we're seeing patients sooner, so we're capable of doing more. Because we're getting them before they're broken completely, which is wonderful. There's a whole lot more we can do in terms of extending, not just longevity, but health span if we can see them earlier. So that's fantastic that we're seeing this as a trend across the country. Conventional veterinarians – do you have good working relationships with conventional veterinarians in your area, where you're sharing information and you're able to support each other?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Yes, we're fortunate, again, I've got some longevity in the area, still the vast majority of our clients find us through word of mouth with other clients. But because I've been doing this since 2001 I've got relationships with local veterinarians, and always tried to be really good about giving them feedback and just being our part of the pet's health care team, the integrative medicine part, sending them back to their regular veterinarian, their primary care veterinarian for the things that we don't do. And yeah, I've been really fortunate to have some local veterinarians who are really supportive.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. What is your favorite aspect of being an integrative veterinarian? What do you enjoy or appreciate most about the type of medicine that you practice?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

I think it's not the big things, although they're gratifying, the dog that comes in that's paralyzed that we can help walk again. For me, it's that couple who's got the pet that can't get upstairs to sleep with the owners anymore, and so for years maybe one parent has been sleeping downstairs with the dog because it can't get upstairs. And if we can make that little change to improve everyone's life, it's just a huge thing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's great. Neil, if you could give one word of advice or tip or words of wisdom to pet parents, or to veterinarians out there, what would you impart to them? What would you share with them?

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Consider what we have to offer sooner. And think of us as an important part of your pet's health care team. I mean in 2020 that's the way that human medicine works and that's the way that we should work, is that my role as the integrative part of that pet's care should combine really nicely with the primary care veterinarian, or maybe one or two, our patients are probably a lot like yours where they're maybe seeing two to three specialists in addition to their primary care veterinarian, and we can be an important part of the team earlier in the process and have our biggest impact then.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. I couldn't agree with you more. That space for proactive medicine is something that integrative veterinarians tend to focus on more so. And I think that piece of proactivity can carry many patients farther, longer if we can incorporate it sooner. So wise words. Dr. Neil, thank you so much for joining me today, thank you for participating in our Integrative Veterinary Medicine Awareness Week. I appreciate everything you're doing in Ohio.

Dr. Neal Sivula:

Thanks so much, it was my pleasure.