

# Hospice Care:

## A Special Interview with Ella Bittel, DVM

By Dr. Karen Becker

**KB: Dr. Karen Becker**

**EB: Dr. Ella Bittel**

**EB:** Hello. I'm Ella Bittel. I'm a holistic veterinarian, who originally came from Germany. In my practice, I only provide holistic modalities. Every animal that I see has a primary veterinarian who provides the conventional aspects of care. One of the modalities that I do a lot of is acupuncture. I also do chiropractic acupuncture. I do use herbs and homeopathy to some extent. I do craniosacral work. A little bit of everything – Bach flower remedies and essential oils. It's a whole conglomerate of wonderful modalities that I get to play with.

**KB:** Ella, how did you... Did you move from Germany to here after veterinary school?

**EB:** Yes, indeed. I actually came to the United States because I have been exposed, before I was done with my studies, to veterinary chiropractic. That was not available at the time in Germany at all. It was an instant click for me. I spent a day with a practitioner. That was the love of my life for that moment and it started me out on this whole journey in the United States.

**KB:** How interesting. Oftentimes it seems that we have a modality that we're introduced to, it resonates instantly, and you just fall in love. From that came probably your acupuncture training.

**EB:** That's right.

**KB:** Did you do large animal or small animal? Both or just strictly small animal?

**EB:** I'm actually at times end up working with large animals, too. Yes, I do a little bit of both.

**KB:** Both. Did you start in a conventional practice soon after graduation and then moved along? Or did you go right into an integrative practice?

**EB:** Actually, I was asked to work out of a conventional practice because they wanted to have the modalities that I provided be available to their clients. I never had to be involved in the conventional care even though, of course, they refer to me and I may end up referring back to particular diagnostic procedures if I have questions around that or if I feel that would give helpful information for the case.

**KB:** Wonderful. Are you still at that practice?

**EB:** Yes.

**KB:** Wonderful.

**EB:** For a very long time.

**KB:** Wow. That's awesome.

**EB:** It's a relationship.

**KB:** That's actually rare, but that's wonderful.

**EB:** Yes.

**KB:** Talk to us about... You've got a very special place in your heart about caring for older animals and dying animals. Have you always been innately drawn to older animals?

**EB:** Well, I think what happens is that people who provide acupuncture almost automatically end up seeing a lot of senior animals, because acupuncture is so extremely powerful in helping, for instance, with mobility issues, which so commonly become an obstacle toward the older age of the animal. I ended up seeing a lot of senior animals and inside of that, I also ended up seeing quite a number of special needs animals, which are not necessarily close to death but required a much different level of care in terms of having incontinence issues, needing a wheelchair, and things like that.

I do feel that there was something that prepared me for this work very much. During my veterinary studies in Germany, I worked in a residential facility for disabled people. That work – I did this for six years – really prepared me for not being reactive to what my eyes see and not being reactive to how someone looks, but to be really looking for their spirit, their interest in life, and what it is that they would like to do completely independent from their level of abilities. That was an amazing experience. I think that kind of set me up for this type of work.

**KB:** That's wonderful. You have, of course, been practicing for many years. People refer people, who refer other people, and you end up kind of building almost a niche. You've become well known for caring for animals that maybe have special needs or animals that require some additional care. Tell me about your website, which you've created.

**EB:** Our website is called Spirits in Transition. On that website, I'm actually focused on the topic of animal hospice care. The reason why I got into hospice care was an additional event. That was when my heart dog, Momo, died. She was 17 years old. Even though she was a large dog, I knew I was very fortunate that she reached that kind of age at the high level of capacities that she had. She could walk all the way until the end and so forth.

But what happened when she got into the last month of her life, I tried to anticipate. I was always assuming that I would end up euthanizing her. But I try to check in with her and myself, "When is the right time? When should I do that? Is this something that she wants?" We never got to that point where I felt like I got that signal of "Yes, this is the time." And then she actually went into her active dying process. I was unable to recognize the signs because no one had ever prepared me for this.

I thought, "This is the time that I have to euthanize." I packed her up with the help of a friend and loaded her in a car. Within five minutes of being in the car, she died in my arms. That was sort of okay, but I was left with a little bit of a question mark about that. It really took more than a year before all of a sudden, one day, I don't know what triggered it. That thought occurred to me. It's like, "Oh, my gosh, all I asked her was, 'Do you want to be helped to overcome this situation? Or do you want to be helped to get out of the situation?' Be euthanized." I never asked her if she just want me to be there for her during her normal dying process. It had not occurred to me.

And that was a little bit shocking to me because I have always been interested in the holistic aspects of care, meaning, I try to look from all different directions. I've never considered letting an animal die a natural death. I stepped back and I realized that was very much so for the entire veterinary profession.

That was a real wakeup call. That's what got me started into wanting to provide resources to have people be able to be prepared for that happening. That's what had me started giving presentations at veterinary conferences and also creating educational resources for people who are aiming to provide the level of care to their animal loved one that is available also to us humans.

**KB:** How long ago did you begin creating your website?

**EB:** The website has been in existence since 2006.

**KB:** Okay, very good.

**EB:** It does provide an animal hospice helpline, which has been in existence ever since and has been utilized quite a bit. People approach us. They don't know what to do in a certain situation. Often they have many questions in their mind even if the animal is still in a good situation. Many times unfortunately, these people approach us because they feel no longer understood by their regular veterinarian, because the regular veterinarians have not been prepared for this either just like me.

**KB:** Right. Let's go back to veterinary school. I know probably German teaching style's potentially different from the United States. At Iowa State University, there is a course on how to help counsel clients through difficult situations. But there actually isn't a course on hospice care for the patient. It's how to phrase certain things and how to be sensitive to pet lovers' needs. But the actual art of helping an animal die, well, there wasn't a class on that. You probably didn't have any training either.

**EB:** No.

**KB:** I think about what an important thing that is to consider teaching veterinary students. Because death is as natural as being born is. But we're not counseled; we are counseled on how to help pregnant mamas give birth and we're counseled on how to take care of those neonatal babies. But we're not counseled on how to help animals die well. I don't...

**EB:** Yeah, so true.

**KB:** Yeah. We're just not.

**EB:** Yes.

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**KB:** Veterinarians oftentimes don't know what to do. And I totally agree with you. We are told that when an animal sometimes is no longer productive, we just euthanize it. Or if the veterinarian feels that there's no quality of life, we put the animal to sleep. Oftentimes our clients, the pet guardians, they don't know what to do and of course, they're overwhelmed with the emotion. So many people have grief after. And oftentimes when there's been a euthanasia situation that the guardian didn't feel went well, [they feel] they should have selected a different path, or they should have done things differently, it stays with you. Until you work through that, it stays with you forever.

**EB:** That is exactly right. That is one of the big tasks that human hospice has also taken on, because it became so clear that this is the final moment that will stay with us forever. We cannot go back. We cannot redo it. It is so important to create a good memory. And it is one of the major benefits of providing hospice care to animals.

People report that their grieving process actually can take place already while the animal is still alive. And for some reason, it is possible to... It seems to be easier to process that grief in the presence of that loved

one. When the animal has passed, there is some grieving, but people are often surprised how much less of grief they're experiencing in comparison to what they anticipated or also have experienced before.

The other aspect that is often reported is that they feel much, much prepared for the dying process of a human loved one. It even goes as far as feeling much better prepared for their own dying process. We're looking at extremely deep-going feelings and needs of the humans, including the children.

**KB:** Sure.

**EB:** Children's exposure to death is often the first time through a pet. How the parents handle that situation is extremely relevant. Many parents have that desire to protect their children from what they consider a potentially damaging experience or scary experience. It turns out that children are very capable of dealing with death. They're often still so much more connected to our natural instincts that they often become a support for the parent.

The first hosts for my weekend seminars, *Spirits in Transition*, which I have given numerous times, were all people, who as they were a child, their parents had kept them from experiencing the end, the dying of their own animal. It was incomplete. It was major influence in their life until that point where they were in the seminar in which we showed a video of a naturally dying dog that receives hospice care. We showed the last 48 hours of an animal's process. And seeing that has brought incredible completion and peace to those people.

**KB:** Yeah. So, no two lives die the same way. Everyone's transition, every creature's transition is going to be uniquely theirs. For people who are watching this video, maybe this is their first pet – their first dog, first kitty, their first bird, their first loved animal – and they hear this. Of course, sometimes just thinking about your animal transitioning is overwhelming.

Can you give some words of wisdom? Because you have not only been through those so many times, but you've counseled so many pet lovers through this process. Can you offer? I would say the overwhelming emotion, which oftentimes resonates when you potentially can see that your animal is older or even in the dying process, is fear. People are overcome with fear.

**EB:** Exactly.

**KB:** Can you offer some insights as to how to cope with our own feelings of fear enough that we can still be good guardians and do our jobs in serving our animals until they've made a complete transition?

**EB:** What a beautiful question that is. I think that was the main purpose for me developing these educational resources – to address our fears. I want to give practical applications because if we know how to deal with a certain situation, it reduces fear by itself. But there is this aspect in which we really are served well when we spend some time contemplating on our mortality and our animal's mortality, and deal with the emotions around that.

There are actually practical tools – I teach them both in my seminars and online classes – where even body techniques can help work with that fear. My biggest piece of advice to anyone who has an animal family member is to prepare while your animal is still well. I want to make a really big point out of that. There is no right or wrong in terms of what people choose at the end of their animal's life. No one can give a promise that even if you don't wish to make a euthanasia decision and aim for doing everything that it takes to do hospice care that the animal will be able to pass in its own time comfortably.

One of the pieces of advice that we give on our helpline every single time and I give to my patients is I set them up with the ability to have an in-home euthanasia at the moment that it becomes evident that disturbing symptoms can no longer be sufficiently controlled. This is the area in which I feel the

veterinary profession can still learn so much in terms of what we can do and what is being done in human hospices is very, very similar usually. That allows us to overcome those symptoms.

But if we do not have that knowledge at that time or we reached that end where we feel like we can give that level of care or whatever else the reason is, we do have to have that Plan B in place, so that we're not forced to schedule it. We don't go, "Oh, on Friday next week at 3:00 PM is the right time." But we can say, "Now this happened, we're looking at what we can do to solve the situation. It seems to work but we know we cannot maintain it for any length of time." Euthanasia may still be the best solution in that very situation.

Or if someone is not attracted to hospice care, I can totally understand that, too. It's not something that is right for everyone. I just wish it to be available for that part of the population for whom that is a very important decision that they want to make, so that they don't get abandoned at that moment in time where they really do need support.

**KB:** For people who have the gift of you or other veterinarians like you in their area, [you're] a tremendous resource and a point of stability during this really emotional time for them. Not everyone has that option. But probably part of the reason that you created the website is to give people... If you live in rural Montana and you don't have a hospice veterinarian, you still have access to some support in terms of your website. You may not have a physical veterinarian, who can come to your house as some people have the option of having the beautiful luxury of this service, but there are still resources that can help people make wise decisions, decisions that feel well to them and that sit well to them.

Could you speak a little bit about... I have seen at my practice that most of the time, the animals are very much at peace and grounded out with transitioning. It's as natural as coming into the world; the exit is equally as natural. But because humans are oftentimes not okay with the exit, the animal – when I say sails through the death process – is fine; for all practical purposes dying, but fine. The guardian is not. And sometimes my job is to help the person caring for the animal to recognize that his animal is fine. They go, "What do you mean my animal is fine? My animal's dying!" I say, "Yes. Dying beautifully and perfectly, and doing a great job. Your dog/cat is doing a great job of dying."

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It can be so confusing to them. Can you help guardians recognize that the only one we're really in control of is ourselves and that sometimes the best gift we can give ourselves and the animal we're caring for is to let go of our need to want to control every possible scenario, because ultimately we can't control all the moving parts. We feel failure, frustration, inadequacy, and guilt. We feel emotions that aren't really ours to own. But sometimes we put them on ourselves, when the animals really are doing a great job all by themselves.

Sometimes we need to let ourselves off the hook and recognize that actually we have a little role model right in front of us on how to die excellently without actually much of anything. But we feel like we have to do things. Sometimes having a multitude of veterinarians help owners and guardians see that sometimes their job is just to sit quietly with their animal, and that's enough. People say, "I feel like I'm doing a disservice." I don't know why that's an American mentality that we always have to be hovering, doing, hovering, doing.

But I know you believe that animals have the innate ability to manage their own energy beautifully. Animals are primarily grounded out all the time. They're balanced. They were born innately balanced, and they die most of the time innately balanced; humans, [that's] not necessarily the case. I guess... Could you speak into the thought or the idea that animals are going to transition okay and that our job in

terms of support and being there for them may not be an active role? There's maybe a passive role and an active role.

**EB:** That is so very true. I do think it is a societal issue that we have that tendency to think we have to do, do, do. I do observe that in my clients. They're comfortable all the way to the point where they know what to do. When the point comes, when there's really nothing left to do, because the final dying process will unfold in its own way smoothly, (there is that term) "being there," just being with the animal without bringing anything else into the space other than being present and allowing for the process to unfold; without clinging in that moment; and without being torn up by grief in that very moment when the individual is wanting to transition.

I think that is one of the great benefits of providing hospice care. People come to that place where they realize it is okay. It is okay that this life ends now. Sometimes there's even relief because the burden is considerable when caring for an animal with a complicated pathologic picture. It usually is not the dying process really that is the problem; it is the terminal illness that needs to be managed. There comes a point when that illness no longer plays a role, the dying process just unfolds, and where there's really very little to do.

What helps in that moment is to minimize the influences of the environment and to keep it quiet. There are hospices, human hospices, in which in the room of a dying person, the television runs full blast. Sometimes that may be the right thing to do, because maybe that patient was someone who consumed a lot of television that it has a calming influence for that person at that moment.

But oftentimes the television runs for the people who are there because they do not find that ability in themselves to be present in what is happening because of their fear not being fully addressed. I do feel that preparing in the best way that we can for the end is one aspect with our perception of death. The animal allows us to do that. It is part of why it can be such an amazing gift of the animal. They have given us so much throughout their lives, and they really have often a big gift to give in the end when we allow ourselves to be present in it.

There are many stories where I have been told that when a person who was present for the dying animal was in a considerable amount of emotional upheaval, the animal actually couldn't go. It's one thing that the dying process takes often more time than people expect. I think part of why people expect the dying process to go faster than it does is simply because we're not familiar with it and we're exposed to all these deaths on television that just go, like, the person said one more word and closed his eyes. That was it. But that is not typical of a normal dying process.

If we can step beyond this, "Why does it not go faster? It should be different. It should be over," if we can just be with it, it is a really great opportunity for us.

**KB:** [Those are] all great information for people who either have been through this and who are looking to prepare differently; who have a healthy pet but want to be able to plan accordingly; or guardians who have animals that are in the last chapter of their life and they're looking to make good decisions with the absence of fear. I appreciate you taking time to give us your words of wisdom and spending some time explaining what you do to us. Thank you, Ella.

**EB:** Thank you.

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