

# Bringing Awareness About Integrative Veterinary Medicine

This article features a series of interviews with integrative medicine veterinarians from around the world who share fascinating insights about why they chose to diversify their medical training beyond veterinary school to offer a broader array of healing options to their patients.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In this article, I highlighted some of the integrative veterinarians I've had the pleasure of interviewing and why it was important to them to continue growing and learning beyond their basic veterinary school education
- Today's guests are integrative veterinarians Dr. Steve Marsden (Canada), Dr. Tanya Grantham (South Africa) and Dr. Neal Sivula (Ohio)
- We believe in empowering pet owners with resources and tools to build healthier, happier pets. However, we realize we're just one voice among many amazing veterinarians, healers, rescue organizations and other remarkable individuals dedicated to helping animals

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Bark and whiskers aims to bring together a national and international community of pet lovers that not only embraces common sense integrative veterinary medicine, but also shares my passion for proactive wellness: intentionally creating healthier animals by making informed, wise lifestyle decisions over a pet's lifetime.

In this article, I'll be highlighting other integrative veterinarians who I've had the pleasure of interviewing on why it was important to them to continue growing and learning beyond their basic veterinary school education, to add additional tools to their medical toolbox, and how broadening their knowledge base has positively impacted them.

Today's guests are integrative veterinarians Dr. Steve Marsden, Dr. Tanya Grantham, and Dr. Neal Sivula. The following are highlights from our conversations — the full transcripts can be downloaded at the above links.

## Dr. Steve Marsden

My first guest is Dr. Steve Marsden, who is both a holistic veterinarian and a naturopathic physician and splits his time between two thriving practices in Canada — a holistic veterinary practice and a naturopathic medical practice for people.

*"When I did regular medicine," he explains, "I became disillusioned and dissatisfied. I remember telling myself, back in my mid-30s that I would probably just practice until I was in my mid-40s, make what I could of a living until then, sell my clinic, and then go redeem myself somewhere —maybe treat orangutans in Borneo or something.*

*Looking back, I now know I never would have made it to my mid-40s. I was burned out on western medical practice. It turned out that complementary medicine was exactly what I was looking for in terms of revitalizing my interest in my career and alleviating compassion fatigue.*

*There are a lot of possible fields that veterinarians can go into to get some relief from compassion fatigue and depression. The experts say you need to create some sort of filter that limits the type of clientele you're seeing to things you enjoy.*

*Holistic medicine has the added advantage of not just limiting your exposure to those that are open to holistic medicine, but also being a discipline that completely changes how the practice is run, from a more leisurely pace and a much calmer waiting room to a deeper relationship with your charges, and the knowledge you are practicing your conscience.*

*In addition to all those benefits, holistic medicine has the added advantage of much more gratifying treatment outcomes. When I was an idealistic kid, what I imagined I would be able to do for people and their animals — holistic medicine comes much closer to that than western medical practice. I'm now the veterinarian I was born to be."*

I asked Dr. Marsden what he would like veterinarians and pet parents to know about helping companion animals achieve and maintain good health.

*"Diet is everything," he replies. "Diet underpins health. No matter what medical model you're going to use, it's the foundation for any effective treatment, be it conventional, Chinese medical, etc. The question, then, is how do we define a healthy diet?"*

*There's a lot of nutritional research that never gets into the hands of our conventional colleagues because it doesn't necessarily support the product line that a particular pet food company is selling, and it's usually the pet food companies that play the role of funneling nutrition information to practitioners.*

*Veterinarians need to expand their knowledge base to fully deploy diets to their patients' advantage. They need to use medical research databases like PubMed as a first step to understanding why a real food diet makes an animal better.*

*I tell pet owners is that if they decide not to use a real food diet to save money, it often doesn't work out that way. It doesn't make sense financially because they're going to visit the veterinarian more if they feed their animal out of a can of dog food or a bag of cat food. So, it's not really a financial decision they're making, although they might think it is. It's a convenience decision.*

*They need to know that they're trading their animal's well-being for the sake of their own personal convenience and the ease of their existence. I find that once I put things in that context, pet owners are much more open to trying real food diets because they don't want to do harm to their animals just because they are trying to make their own lives easier."*

Dr. Marsden also suggests that practitioners who are feeling depressed and burned out (which is a significant problem in the veterinary community) and who are wondering whether holistic medicine might be right for them consider initially investigating holistic medicine practices through webinars and other resources that don't require a huge financial or time investment. A good venue for that is the College of Integrative Veterinary Therapies.

He also suggests they consider trying holistic medicine on themselves to see how it affects their stress level, depression, and physical health. From the Chinese medicine perspective, how we think, and the physical health of our bodies are connected. You can help improve that connection through improving your diet, getting out in nature, getting a bit more exercise, taking some herbs, trying some acupuncture or yoga, and so on.

Even just a few of these things can help a lot, and at that point the veterinarian doesn't need clinical studies as proof of efficacy — the changes they feel in their own bodies and minds are proof enough of the power of holistic medicine.

## **Dr. Tanya Grantham**

My second guest today is Dr. Tanya Grantham, an integrative veterinarian practicing in South Africa. Dr. Grantham grew up on a farm, and when she was 5 years old, she rescued a lizard from some dogs. When her father came home from work that evening, she said to him, "I'm going to be a vet," and spent the next 20 years making it happen.

After graduating from veterinary school, Dr. Grantham spent the next 13 years working at and eventually owning a conventional small animal veterinary practice. At around year 10, she developed health problems and was ultimately forced to sell her practice.

Over the years, Dr. Grantham had become very interested in why some dogs did so much better than others after surgery to repair things like luxating patellas (floating kneecaps), cranial cruciate ligament injuries, and hip dysplasia. She began studying hydrotherapy and other physical rehabilitation therapies for animals, and when she regained her health, she opened a physical rehabilitation facility for dogs and cats.

*"I opened my rehabilitation practice in 2009 in the same area in which I had practiced regular veterinary medicine," Dr. Grantham explains. "I made it a point not to do any standard veterinary work because I didn't want my colleagues to view me as a competitor. Most of my initial patients came by word of mouth and from clients I'd had in the past.*

*I made it a practice that every time I saw a new patient, I got the name of the regular vet and sent them an email or phoned them. After 6 to 8 weeks, I'd send them a progress report on their patient.*

*Gradually, over time, I would say 60% to 65% of those vets grew comfortable with me prescribing physical rehabilitation and pain management for their patients. Some are still a bit skeptical about acupuncture, but these days, more of my referrals come from veterinarians than from word of mouth.*

*The driving force for me has always been about making animals feel better. But what I've discovered in my rehabilitation practice is that spending 45 minutes with my patients and clients regularly — once or twice a week — is that I also have a passion for informing and empowering pet parents.*

*I firmly believe that the more information and options they have, and the more empowered they feel, the more likely it is they'll make the best decisions possible for their pets, themselves, and their families.*

*Often clients come to me after they've been given an option of surgery or euthanasia, and neither of those is palatable to them. 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 still very much a part of the family. It's about educating the pet-owning public as well as my veterinary colleagues."*

I asked Dr. Grantham, "If you could share one idea or thought or insight with all the veterinary professionals watching and reading here today, what would it be?"

*"I would share that moving into the rehabilitation sphere has allowed me to manage my time in terms of appointments," she responds.*

*"It has given me more fulfillment than I thought possible, and I'm still doing what I've always wanted to do, which is help animals. In veterinary medicine, we're living in an era of compassion fatigue and burnout, and so the more you can diversify and the more options you have available, the less likely you'll be to falter."*

## **Dr. Neal Sivula**

My final guest today is Dr. Neal Sivula, owner of the Dancing Paws Animal Wellness Center, an integrative veterinary practice in Richfield, Ohio. Dr. Sivula is also the 2019-2020 President of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA).

*"Like a lot of veterinarians who get introduced to integrative medicine, I had some personal health problems," Dr. Sivula explains. "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.*

*I was introduced to a wonderful physician who was trained in acupuncture. He started treating me and loaned me some textbooks, and my interest just took off from there.*

*I finished my residency and spent a few years in private practice in Minnesota — it was an equine practice. When I moved home back to Ohio a few years later, I started my own large animal practice, which was a mobile practice, and began doing chiropractic and acupuncture with my patients.*

*And then along came a well-timed article in Dog Fancy magazine about chiropractic for dogs, and clients started calling wondering if I could work on their dogs. So over time, I began adding in some small animal integrative medicine into my practice, and after a couple of years, I was fortunate to be able to transition my practice to entirely integrative medicine.*

*For the last 10 years or so, I've been doing integrative medicine for small animals only at my Dancing Paws clinic. Most of our patients are geriatric, and we love that. We love encouraging the human-animal bond and being involved in a lot of important decisions our clients must make.*

*I'm the only doctor in the practice and I have five technical staff. We have an underwater treadmill for hydrotherapy, and most of our time is spent doing acupuncture, chiropractic, and herbal medicine. We also have a Reiki practitioner who comes in, and we do a lot of massage on our patients as well."*

When Dr. Sivula started his integrative medicine practice, his patients were primarily debilitated animals who'd been seen by several other veterinarians, and he was often their last hope. But over time, his patient mix has changed.

*"I've been doing this long enough now that I have clients I've known for 15 years, and they've seen the benefits of our integrative approach," says Dr. Sivula. "Over time, we've begun seeing patients earlier in the process. For example, a client may bring in a new pet in for an initial wellness exam, and we're then involved in that animal's life every step of the way.*

*Nowadays, though we're still seeing more patients in the later stages of disease, we're also seeing a growing number of healthier older patients who come in for maintenance work."*

Dr. Sivula's final thought is for all the pet parents watching and reading here today.

*"Consider what we have to offer sooner," he recommends. "And think of us as an important part of your pet's health care team. In 2020, this is the way human medicine works and it's the way veterinary medicine should work as well.*

*My role as an integrative practitioner on your pet's health care team should blend nicely with your primary care veterinarian as well as any specialists your pet is seeing. We can be an important part of the team earlier in your pet's life or disease process and have our biggest impact then."*

You can learn more about integrative veterinary medicine at the **[College of Integrative Veterinary Therapies](#)**.

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