

Embracing Integrative Modalities to Help Heal Horses and Small Animals

A Special Interview With Dr. Colleen Smith

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and Lorraine has nominated Dr. Colleen Smith for a Game Changer Award. And we have Dr. Colleen joining us today to tell us more about her evolution into integrative and holistic medicine, and more about the great work that she's doing with small animals. So, congratulations on your Game Changer [Award], and thank you so much for joining me.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Oh, you're so welcome. I'm so happy to be here. And I'm just so excited because you're just such a pioneer in getting these alternative treatments, alternative medicine out in the world through a wonderful book and all this kind of stuff, and I'm just so happy to be here to share my story and also hopefully share some more information for people who feel like they're stuck with certain treatments.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, beautiful. We are colleagues in the trenches in the sense that I'm anxious to hear your story, but inevitably what we learned in veterinary school is fantastic, great for trauma [and] acute infectious diseases. However, the vast majority of dogs and cats aren't dying from contagious diseases. They're degenerating. And that's probably your clientele base, like mine, is just animals that have not had the support that they need to be able to recover.

So, back up and first tell our listeners and readers about why you wanted to become a vet and then once you became a vet, what's the story or the evolution to you adding more tools to your tool belt?

Dr. Colleen Smith:

I always wanted to be a vet since I was a kid. But undergrad, I actually was at a school where I was in an animal science program. But I'm from the beach, and I was the only kid from the beach, and everybody else was from the farms, and my counselor was like, "I don't think you're going to make it, so you should just get out." And I was like, "Okay, I guess I should go to a different major." So I went and became a biology major.

So, after I graduated, I worked as a chemist for several years and then I was like, "That's it, I'm going back to school. I'm going to do it." So 10 years later, I went back to vet school and it was conventional, conventional-minded. I didn't know much else. But before I went to vet school, though, I was a veterinary technician. And there was one weekend I spent at a seminar, and there was a veterinarian there at the school – because I was at a university – talking about acupuncture, and I was like, "I don't know about this." But after the end of the weekend, someone told me to go take one of the horses out because one of the horses was on a PowerPoint presentation, and they did needles, needled the entire horse. And this horse that was there had horrible ring bone, horrible arthritis, and it was running around this pasture and I'm like, "What did you do to this horse?"

And I was listing off all the medications they could be doing, and they're like, "They did acupuncture." And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no." They're like, "Yes, they did." And I was like, "This is amazing." And I just had this light bulb eureka moment situation. So, I went onto school, I did conventional, and the crazy thing is after school I did an internship with the doctor who did the lecture years before that acupuncture.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Cool.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

So I spent two years with her, really balancing immediately eastern and western medicine. And so I got thrown in the fire right out of school, but loved it. I just was like, "This is such a great –" It's a huge tool in the toolbox. And I very immediately blended [it], but it was tough because I was still trying to get my feet wet and figuring out how to treat and then also advise with alternatives, which I didn't really have much of a background with, but it was great.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Sure. You just figured everything out at once, which is actually – that actually gave you probably a really good jumpstart. A lot of people end up looking for adding tools to their tool belt after they've been in practice burnout for 15 years. But I'm thankful that you did both simultaneously because you were able to – From the get-go of your career, you had a very well-stocked tool belt, which is wonderful.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Yeah, I can see where one started and the other one blended in, and it worked really well together.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, do you treat horses or just small animals?

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Well, I have a clinic of my own now. I've had it for 10 years, 12 years. And I don't have space for horses, but it's funny, I have a little alley. And so, if someone really needs to come, they'll just trailer the horse up into the alley. I'll jump into the trailer and do some acupuncture on them and send them on their way. And I don't have a field, I don't have any stocks. I don't have a space to put horses [in], but they just can stay in their little trailer and I can work on them, but mostly small animals.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But that's awesome, and you know how. I don't know how to work on large animals. So, you have the knowledge, you just don't have the space. I don't have space or knowledge. It's wonderful that you can provide that service. That's awesome. So, tell us when and how you opened your animal hospital?

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Well, I've been practicing for about 19 years, and so I've mostly practiced conventionally even though I had – Well, when I first started for two years, it was a mix, and then conventionally, and I got very frustrated because I'm like, "I can do acupuncture for you." And they're like, "Just do some non-steroidals." And I'm like, "I'm not making more money. This is going to the practice." And I got frustrated after about six or seven years, and I decided to start my own practice in 2012. And I just bought this old chemical warehouse and redesigned the whole thing. And now I have my practice in Chattanooga. So, it's great. I love it.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And tell us, for people that are tech-savvy, if you have a website, if people wanted to learn more, get ahold of you, are you on social media? Website? How would people go about finding you?

Dr. Colleen Smith:

So, chattanoogaholisticvet.com is our website, and we're at Chattanooga Holistic Vet on Facebook, too. And Instagram, I think it's chai.holistic.vet. So, Chattanooga Holistic Animal Institute is the long name and we call ourselves CHAI for short.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Smart.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

So, people are like, "Tea?" And I'm like, "No, it's not tea. It's a vet practice."

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's good. That's really good. So, what do you love most? You get up in the morning, what do you love most about the work that you're doing?

Dr. Colleen Smith:

It's a challenge. I'm now the only deal in town, so I do a lot of second opinion. You probably see this too, is that I'm a second opinion person. So, they come in, they've had everything done. They have a diagnosis of cancer or liver failure or something going on and they're like, "We've already done all these tests, we've already done all this stuff, nothing's working." And I'm like, "Okay."

It's challenging. So every day is something new. It's definitely not "easy button medicine" at this point. And I love the challenge. I think I would be so bored if I was a desk job person, I'm not sure I'd be around. So I love the challenges and I love – So I see mostly geriatrics and older, but when I get a puppy, I'm super excited because I'm like, "Oh, let's start you from the beginning with food, nutrition and doing a minimal vaccine protocol." And so I can just start them from scratch and that makes me really excited.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, for sure. I totally get that. We have to celebrate puppies when we get them, especially second generation puppies. It's even better because they've gone from 0.5 pet parents to 2.0 pet parents and they've got it, they're in, and then it's just like it is very cellularly invigorating to get puppies with empowered, educated guardians. It's like, yeah, that's reason to celebrate every day for sure.

So, you've been a veterinarian for long enough now. You've had this amazing evolution of a career, all of these great modalities, helping lots of – I don't want to say bottom of the barrel, but oftentimes that's when people think about diversifying or they get desperate enough that they go looking for alternatives that could be helpful. If you could tell the world one thing or if you'd want the world to know one thing about the work that you're doing or thoughts that you have about where you're at right now, what would it be?

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Start preventatively. And I'm so happy that you have put it out there with nutrition. And I think that is a huge hole in our profession and the human profession, is that we're not looking at nutrition as medicine, and it totally is. You only work as good as the chemicals you put in your body. And I'm like, if you want to minimize whatever genetic stuff – some breeds are genetically predisposed of things. Whatever's going on with your animal, if you change the nutrition, make it whole food, species-appropriate – I've heard you talk about that so much – that is putting you so far ahead of the game. That's so preventative.

As much as there's disease process already going on, it could still improve it. Sadly, I've even told some people, "If you don't change this dog's diet, they're just going to be on medication forever. That's the one gate to help this animal heal." And I have so many patients that they heal and owners are like, "Who do you go to?" And I'm like, "Well." And they're like, "I see how much nutrition mattered. I think I need to change my diet." So, it's kind of cool.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It is super cool. I call that health traveling up the leash because sometimes we don't think about it for ourselves. Most of my clients, anyway, take way better care of their animals than they do of themselves, my new clients. Once people see it, they're like, "If I apply health and wellness lifestyle principles to my life, do you think the same thing will happen?" And it takes a lot longer for people to get healthy, but it is inspiring to see. We've got little role models in our house, on the other end of the leash, that can help reaffirm and build us up and give us the hope we need because we've seen it happen with their lives. Their lives can be transformed. So, I get that. That's wonderful.

Lorraine said – your client that nominated you – she had a dog that had microhepatita, with liver enzymes off the chart, and she said that over the course of the year that her dog – from birth congenital defect, no such thing as liver transplants with dogs, but her liver enzymes are now normal because of the protocol that you have used and that also has to be incredibly rewarding for you.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

It really is. The owner, it's sad when they come in and they start talking about what's going on and they just start crying, and you're just like, "Oh." They're devastated. And it's also sad that if the disease doesn't fit the book or any kind of cure doesn't fit the book, then we're done. Hands up. I'm out. So it was good – The big thing too is I had a long conversation about everything this dog is also on. Flea and tick, heartworm, the diet, of course, "Any other chemicals? What's our vaccine protocol? Anything this

dog's being exposed to? Even stuff in the household." Found out she uses those little plugins for air freshener. "Take those out."

So, it's just all these things they don't even think of and it's not really addressed by medicine anyway, but it took a while and we did some rechecks too for the liver over a course of the year, and the owner was just flabbergasted that, "How can they be going down?" And I'm like, "We're healing the liver." It is one of the organs that can heal. So it was great. She's just beside herself. The dog's whole appetite and attitude changed.

The liver [patient] was a little bit of an aggressive dog, a little bit of a grumpy dog, and that all changed, with some little herbals too that I did. The owner was just like, "I have a new dog. [inaudible 00:12:16]"

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. And the diagnosis hasn't changed, but the dog's quality of life is better, longevity is improved, the dog is happier, the dog is healthier. The liver is obviously detoxifying because ALT (alanine transaminase) is normal. This is exactly why we do what we do, but how very rewarding for you to be able to take a woman with a hopeless situation and not just give her hope, but give her a happy dog with normal liver enzymes. It's exactly probably why you get up in the morning and do what you do.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Yeah, it's great. It's great. [She] even went back to her previous vet and they were like, "We probably ran someone else's blood work because this doesn't happen." And I was like, "Okay. Whatever."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Exactly, doesn't matter. We're just thankful that everything is fine now. Yes, yes. I have also had that happen. I've had well-qualified, board-certified doctors retract their diagnosis rather than admit that anything beyond conventional medicine could have helped. And it doesn't matter to me. I just am thankful that the animal is better. And with that, we just move along.

It is wonderful to see our community of proactive wellness practitioners, not just gaining steam, but partnering with our conventional clients and helping them understand that a defensive attitude, or them against us, or a separated divided profession is least helpful when it comes to not only serving our clients but serving our own hearts. And that when we can recognize that we all have things we can bring to the table, we have skills, we have practice sets, and we have protocols that other vets don't, rather than be angry or bash or attack or criticize veterinarians doing things different than we are doing.

I am thankful that we are beginning to enter into an era where veterinarians are recognizing that we need to be inclusive of one another and that it's okay that we have practiced diversity. And I'm very thankful that Lorraine was able to find you and that her dog is doing as well as she is. And I'm just very thankful she also took time to nominate you for your Game Changer Award.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Me too. That was very sweet. I was surprised. Pleasantly surprised.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's wonderful.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

It was great.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Well, thanks for spending time with me today.

Dr. Colleen Smith:

Thank you, too. It was so nice talking to you. So exciting.