

From Making Do to Having the Health Team You Want

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If you have a passion for knowledge about holistic living for your animals and yourself, you're always on the lookout for new information about health, food, medicine, exercise – and all the components that comprise a healthy life, and all the interesting and effective modalities that make up integrative medicine.

We're not doctors, and we know we need doctors. We learn new things and share them with our tried-and-true veterinarian, who has seen us through many animal's lives and deaths. Often, we dearly love these vets. They love us and our animal families. Sometimes the information we bring them is gladly accepted and considered, and occasionally it might send a mainstream vet in a whole new direction. That's fantastic, and if you have that experience you have probably improved or saved a lot of animal lives, and influenced many people indirectly.

Mainstream veterinarians are trained to treat illness. Though "wellness" has become a buzzword, most practitioners are flooded with information from drug companies and the animals they see are not well. They're trying to slow what they view as inevitable degeneration into unhealthy old age. The once a year checkup is an excellent idea – but the majority of the vets we see are trained to see a problem only when it's really become a PROBLEM, and they're not well trained in preventive nutrition or lifestyle, or in seeing the very early patterns that indicate trouble down the road. They might be receptive to your input, and if so, congratulations – but they still might not know what you need to know.

We stick with these situations for quite a while. We like the docs, we don't want them to be mad at us, we are happy if they tolerate our feeding programs without giving us a hard time. We don't think ahead and make sure that the rabies vaccine is a 3-year vaccine until after it's given, and discover that the 1-year vaccine is what was used. We have to argue about vaccines and sometimes sign releases holding a veterinarian harmless since we did not follow their advice about yearly vaccines, in spite of the current 3-year recommendation. If we go in to get an opinion about that odd spot on Frango's shoulder, we might get three kinds of drugs when all we wanted was "spot identification". Our waffling might go on for quite some time, but eventually, it is time to part ways with your "old" practice.

We look for doctors that have advanced knowledge in the areas where we need help. We want to pick the brains of all the practitioners around, looking for someone who is a good fit and who knows more than we do about whatever the topic might be. The internet has changed life radically - access to unlimited resources can be overwhelming. Many people work by phone. Holistic veterinary sites are abundant. There's a lot of repetition in what they promote: but there is considerable difference in approach, skill, and knowledge. As in many fields, you can call yourself a holistic veterinarian if you're a vet and you have want to be "holistic", but this does not indicate any level of skill.

Before we know it we might have 5 vets and several non-veterinary practitioners helping us with our animals. There's no problem these days finding acupuncture, chiropractic, homeopathy, and a lengthy list of integrative modalities. This is a very good thing. But it might also be a mess. We might find ourselves in the same boat with our holistic practitioners as we did before, juggling the conservative guy we've always known with the new knowledge we've acquired. They might disagree with each other. They might not have the time and inclination to consult with each other. Lots of doctors like to do their own thing and have their own favorite products

There are very real pitfalls when you start doctor shopping and using many different doctors, and practitioners cannot save us from them. We need to formulate our ideas and find a

way to orchestrate the coordination of our practitioners as best we can. It is tempting to use them all. It's likely that with a few years of trial and error you will be able to think through what's needed, what's fluff, or perhaps downright silliness. Hopefully you will become educated enough to avoid actual malpractice, stupidity, and bad medicine, which exists in integrative medicine just as in mainstream medicine. Starting with an idea of what you are looking for in general is very helpful.

Our doctors need to be able to educate us, they need to know more than we do about our concerns. They need to be able to see that though they might not have the tools to help us, tools may exist, and they need to have the motivation to seek it out and send us in directions that might help. It would be great if they could oversee our health programs, help to troubleshoot and point out holes in our thinking – unfortunately, it's a rare doctor who is equipped to do that. Those of us who have them are torn: tell your friends and make access to your great vet even harder, or don't tell them and know you might have helped their animals

Say you have been visiting one vet with your dog and you've made a lot of progress with his "allergy" symptoms, and with a previously undiagnosed thyroid problem. You decide to add acupuncture and chiropractic to the mix. Those two additional doctors have their own way of treating some of the issues you are already working with. They are not necessarily going to consult with each other. Or, one doctor may not understand the treatment plan of another – assuming they even have the information, which is not often the case. Clients are notorious for not knowing what information is important: a good doctor is also a good interviewer, who can pull the needed info out of the client, but this is not a common skill. With more experience most of us go into hyper-information mode, which can be irritating to the most recently acquired practitioner (excel spreadsheets detailing daily urination and defecation could be a bit much), but it's better than too little information! In the beginning we may fail to tell them what the whole treatment plan is for each practitioner – thus hindering them all.

At best this is a messy situation, and it's dangerous to the health of your animals. Even herbs can interact negatively. A chiropractic treatment on top of an acupressure treatment followed by a therapeutic swim might be great for one dog – but it could be the last day of an old, frail dog's life.

For example: you've been working with Arlo on thyroid issues and he's doing well on natural thyroid hormone with some glandular support. The practitioner to whom you go for acupuncture for Arlo's achy knee is of the opinion that Chinese herbs with acupuncture are the only way to balance all systems. And, he thinks that you should do the Traditional Chinese Medicine protocol with herbs and acupuncture for all his health issues and leave your glandular supplements and medication on the shelf. He disagrees with the fresh food diet you've been using (successfully, you thought) and wants to switch to one using TCM principles. He is not interested in what you did already, just what he thinks is appropriate. Your new chiropractor (same bum knee) thinks that though your diet, supplements, and medications are ok (you did remember to tell her most of what you do), there are five additional products you should add. She's a good chiropractor, but seems to be adding supplements to a program that's already quite full. Now what?

All of this is costing you a lot of bucks and you have been given some opinions that conflict mightily. Since this progression doesn't happen in one week, often we just add whatever we're told to add and the result is an extensive and expensive lineup of bottles on the counter, which we add to Arlo's food (usually without considering the consequences to the flavor of the food or possible interactions, or the possibility of ...just too much). This leads to digestive upset and yet another vet because "it didn't work". We're embarrassed to go back to the first vet and admit that we talked to someone else.

The ideal plan might be for you to collect opinions, do some research, and make up your own mind. We all need to do a lot more thinking for ourselves and learn to ask good questions. The

person who must decide what to do is – you. It’s hard to shake the training we all have -- the adults are always right, and professionals are “super-adults” – we’re trained not to challenge! You have asked the doctor for an opinion based on their knowledge. You, too, are a thinking being: use your brain to ask questions so that you really understand. Treat yourself like competent being – you are.

The goal of holistic health care is this: remove roadblocks to health, in order that the body may get on with the spectacularly effective tools available to it for maintaining, healing, and growing. Let the brilliant system take care of itself. Supply what support is needed without trying to outsmart: we will never be smarter than any living organism, we will never know it all. After removing roadblocks, let the body heal. Good food, exercise, plenty of stimulation and love, and you are usually much of the way toward health. Whatever is left after this, use minimal intervention always with the goal of supporting, not forcing and assuming that you know better than your dog’s body knows.

How can we accomplish this when we’re in the grip of a situation we want to fix right now? To start, take some deep breaths and know that unless it’s an emergency (for which we have emergency rooms) you have time to gather information, subject it to some thinking, evaluate, and choose a path.

When you ask for an opinion about what path to take, subject all ideas to this question:

“Why is that?”

Do you understand how the plan works, what the goal is, how the system will be influenced or changed? Do you know what the possible outcomes are? Do you understand what the problem really is and how it affects everything else? Do you know if this will help or if possibly the treatment suggested is more likely to be very hard on your already droopy pet? Do you know how the practitioner views these situations in general?

In order to answer these questions, you can just jump in and see what happens. For the sake of your animal and your budget, I suggest that you find out before ahead of time. Interview the doctor, or the practice manager if you can’t get to the doctor, about how they approach the healing process. Find out what you can from the office staff, but be aware that they might not really have a grasp on the practice ethics and approaches. I strongly advocate making and paying for an appointment with the doctor to discuss possibilities. They should be able to answer you, with the disclaimer that every animal is different. Very true, but still there is a general approach. While on the road talking to vet clinics about fresh food diets, I asked these questions a lot, so that I would know where to send people for help. Often, I started by asking about the general plan and treatment for “allergies”. Amazingly, the answer was often “Steroids and antibiotics and hypoallergenic prescription food”. Don’t waste your time where there’s no chance you will be helped.

From my perspective, most practitioners fall into a few categories:

Blazing Hot Docs. Everyone in the world recommends them and their clients have them on very tall pedestals. They know everything and are always learning. They share their ever changing knowledge with their clients and a major goal is the empowerment of the individual human to be able to manage their own health and that of their family, be it animal or human. They have great skills, sometimes in only a few areas but are knowledgeable enough about others and who the experts might be that they can send you along with confidence.

Let us hope that this group grows big enough to help all the animals who need them. Some doctors start out with this attitude and add skill upon skill, while maintaining the view that “do no harm” and “remove obstacles to health” are prime directives. Others earnestly and steadfastly stumble through lengthy soul-searching and learning and graduate from one of the

groups below with great relief. It can be quite a journey from what they learned in veterinary or human medical school to an approach that really integrates holistic thinking.

It's a war, and I'm going to win it! These doctors approach treatment with a combat sort of view. Since we see a lot of this view on TV, sports, and news, it's very familiar. In this practice, it's common to blast whatever the problem is with every tool in the arsenal. Vitamins, herbs, homeopathy, diet, drugs, chemo, immune supports of every kind and lots of them – along with acupuncture using a whole lot of needles and some machines. But there is not much consideration of the strength, character, and personality of the individual. Treatment is done TO them, not with them. This view approaches symptoms, not systems. Though the tools used may be “alternative”, the approach is not holistic. It can also be pretty expensive, but it's easy to be swept along with “more is better”, a classic American point of view. Many of us appreciate being taken off the hook of deciding what's best – but really, you're not off the hook. It's still your decision.

“We do acupuncture” This person has learned a specialty and added it to her mainstream practice. She heard that these modalities are good money makers, people are asking, and she wants to have more tools. The Acupuncture/TCM courses are not a light undertaking, but it seems that it takes more than a commitment to getting through the course for the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine to take root. I've met many brilliant TCM veterinarians, and also a lot who took the course, forgot most of it, and use some cookbook recipes for treatment. Sometimes that's all you need. But be aware that there is a lot more to TCM than a bunch of needles in your dog, even if they have added some western spins like electro-acupuncture.

Chiropractic is the same. Just because someone has done the course does not make them a good chiropractor, nor does it make them a holistic practitioner. You can sort through these people and find those who are *really great* by asking them to tell you about their specialty. Ask around and see who is recommended by everyone. This isn't foolproof, because people often accept quite modest results as adequate, not knowing the difference. But the person recommended when everyone else has failed – that's a person to check out. And you'll probably find that they belong in the first category, Blazing Hot Docs.

How in the world do you choose? You just wanted to get that throwing up problem solved. You didn't want to learn anything about how the digestive system works! Welcome to a whole new existence. You have been lured into the fascinating pastime of finding out the weird and amazing answers to “Why is that?” questions. In order to choose a good chiropractor, you need to know something about chiropractic, and like any other topic, there's the real story, and then there's the sorta-kinda story. Chinese medicine? The same. Fresh food diets? Yes, the same answer - You have to learn about these things.

Keep the treatment plans and suggestions of all your doctors and practitioners together and evaluate to see if they are congruent, if they make sense together. It's very easy to do too much when you have an ill dog. It's great if one of your doctors can serve as your advisor in coordinating recommendations and plans. Always ask yourself how this fits into your ideas about health care, including those emotional areas that have to do with quality of life. If your animal is hysterical when receiving acupuncture, perhaps it's not the best thing for him. Perhaps the newest round of 12 supplements per meal for your dog with cancer is only making him feel bad. Principles I try to apply are:

Less is more: provide support and let the body heal

Give it some time: healing can take a long time, everything is related.

Understand what you're told: if you don't, ask again and learn on your own
(if you don't get answers, find another doctor)

Be respectful of all of those you encounter along the way: a demanding client does not elicit the best from any doctor.

Becoming an effective advocate for yourself and your animals can be frustrating sometimes, but the process stretches your brain and challenges your thinking. You meet all sorts of new people, and your life is changed and enriched. Having a group of health professionals who cooperate and help you to orchestrate great care for your animals is rewarding and fulfilling. Great practitioners are looking for clients like you! Post this pledge somewhere you will see it often, to help you remember:

I am responsible for my health and wellbeing, and for that of the animals in my care.

I will become a knowledgeable advocate for myself and my animals in all realms of life.

I understand that life, healing, and health are always changing, requiring me to learn and evolve in order to be an effective advocate. I will not abdicate this responsibility to any other person or doctor.

The health of my animals rests in my hands