

Feeding a Ketogenic Diet to Facilitate Healing in Sick Dogs

A Special Interview With Mike Battaglia

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and Debbie has nominated Mike Battaglia for a Game Changer Award, and I am so thankful Mike has taken some time out of his busy day today to meet with me and tell me more about the work that he is doing and why he's so passionate about it. So Mike, congratulations on your Game Changer Award, and I'm looking forward to learning more about the inspiration behind why you are doing what you're doing. So thanks for joining me.

Mike Battaglia:

Thanks for having me. And once again, thanks for taking time out of your day to have this talk with me.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So Mike, back up for our listeners and readers that maybe don't know about your history, your background, your passion. Kind of walk us through how you have decided to focus on nutrition and specifically the ketogenic diet for dogs. There has to be a story behind that.

Mike Battaglia:

There definitely is a story behind that. So basically, I'm going to say long story short, but it's not a short story. So well, I'll try to condense it. Basically, my dog, Emmy, which we adopted from our local Doberman rescue group, Illinois Doberman Rescue, we adopted her as a newborn at eight weeks old, and that was back in 2012. And unfortunately, by the time she was about four years old, she had developed a small lump, a small bump on the top side of her back, and right before she turned 5 years old, that lump was diagnosed as MCT cancer.

So as many pet parents are fortunately aware of, many people go through this, you get the diagnosis for your dog and you're on the other end of that phone from that phone call being told that your dog has cancer and your heart sinks. It's a horrible feeling and people like me as many others, you immediately feel the urgency to want to do something to try to help your dog, quicker than just being told to wait for the next appointment.

So that led me to, like so many others, hop online, start researching everything I can. So I started learning about ketogenic diet and what Keto Pet was doing out in Texas at the time. So I started learning about that and that in turn gotten me started on learning all about ketogenic diet to implement it with my dog. And shortly after starting that, I started realizing, oh wow, this is actually pretty complex. So for the average person to figure these diets out, it can be a little overwhelming. So that is one of the reasons that got me started in starting the Facebook group, the Ketogenic Dog Group, on Facebook to start the little community of bringing people together to, I guess, network, console one another as a support group for people going through cancer with their dogs, start learning about the diets, how they work, why they work.

I guess that's kind of the gist of very briefly, how I got started with all of this. And then how I mentioned before, our little chat before this, when I watched you in the Pet Fooled documentary, that was an eye-opening thing to me. I'm like, "oh my God, there's this huge problem. It's plaguing the pet food industry of what I'm feeding my dog." So I think I had watched Pet Fooled, literally almost at the exact same time

all of this was happening in my life, so I just hit the ground running, I guess, with all of this. All these different things were happening.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Did you discover even that term ketogenic diet? Had you heard it before your girl got sick, or was that a part of the discovery of you're like, "oh my gosh, my dog has cancer," and then you went down a ketogenic rabbit trail, or did you have some understanding of the benefits of ketosis for cancer? And so you took your research in that direction?

Mike Battaglia:

Well, not to stray too far off topic, but staying on the topic of ketogenic diet and ketosis at the same time this was going on, some friends of ours had a newborn baby, which she was still an infant. She was just born, they were still at the hospital. She started having seizures. They couldn't figure out why, what was going on with her. So ultimately, they finally figured out she had GLUT1 deficiency, which is a disorder that doesn't ... The glucose isn't transported to the brain. So in the absence of glucose in the brain, the human, the baby in this case, has seizures. So since there is no medicine, there's no traditional, there's no therapy, there's no cure for GLUT1 deficiency, the only way to manage it is through ketogenic diet. So I learned and heard about it then, and then I knew how it was being used for seizures and epilepsy, and then I dove down the rabbit hole information and the research with using it for cancer.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So your learning curve, when all of this hit, Mike, you have to look back on that time, and it had to have been like ...

Mike Battaglia:

Yep, yep.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Vertical learning curve, number one. Also vertical overwhelming probably at least initially. The ketogenic diet is if you don't know anything about it's totally ... When you first start trying to figure out, especially with a state of fear or panic involved, it's overwhelming. And so you were dealing with the emotional aspects of a diagnosis, but then also trying to navigate, okay, I have no idea what you were feeding before, but probably if you're like most pet lovers in the US, you went from a high carb, ultra processed diet pretty quickly to a no carb unprocessed diet, and that's overwhelming. Let me just say it this way, you had a lot of moving parts. There's a lot going on.

Mike Battaglia:

Absolutely. And you're a 100% right. I was one of those people feeding the ultra high processed kibble, and I thought I was feeding the premium kibble. I'm spending all this money on this bag of garbage, essentially is all it was. So yeah, I mean, I had everything happening at once. Between the diet, going from kibble, going to raw, going to keto, learning about all these different things. It was definitely a lot to take in. All at the same time in one ear, you got this one group of people trying to tell you that, "oh my God, you can't feed a dog that has cancer, you can't feed that dog raw meat, you're going to kill it." Or "you can't feed a dog that much fat. You're going to cause pancreatitis." You have all these people on this camp telling you one thing, and you got these people here telling you another thing. How do you make sense of who's right and who's wrong?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes, of course, so much so that hence Ronnie and I making the dog cancer series about this because it was, and that's a six-hour documentary, and we still didn't ... That covered the nuts and bolts of it enough to hopefully give people enough background enough to get started somewhere. But certainly unending questions and so much more research and worldwide conversation needed to happen before, especially the veterinary community can or will get on board. So there's also that piece that then has to be navigated.

But a lot has transpired over the last five years. I mean, thankfully, at least veterinarians are, at least they've heard the term ketosis now. They have some idea of what it is. But I bet that uphill battle, at least within the veterinary community, it's certainly not done. And as much as we are educating one set of veterinarians, we have veterinarians that either have remained uneducated or don't want to become educated and that's another uphill battle. Mike, the people that you are primarily helping, people are reaching out to you or they're joining the Facebook group, and they are people, I'm assuming, either with dogs with epilepsy and or dogs dealing with cancer. Is that a fair assumption?

Mike Battaglia:

Yeah, I mean, hands down that's two of the biggest things that we're using the keto diet for, cancer and epilepsy. And surprisingly enough, it can also be very beneficial for dogs that are overweight. My dog went from eating that ultra-high processed, high carbohydrate kibble diet, we managed to lose 17 pounds on her frame. And at the time, none of our vets had never told me or explained the BCS chart, body condition score chart, to me. None of the vets advised me at that time that, oh yeah, your dog could probably lose a few pounds. In my eyes, she looked great. She was active, she did everything with me. But in retrospect, and to this day, looking at pictures of her, a 17-pound difference is just, it's like a whole 'nother dog. And if you look at the statistics on the obesity epidemic in dogs these days where over 50% are overweight and obese, you just think about the ramifications on these dogs that are unnecessarily having to go through their life carrying around all that extra weight and how unhealthy that is.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And then of course, not only on joints, cardiovascular system, the obvious, but how much inflammation those dogs are [inaudible 00:10:44], and it's out of the chronic inflammation that the cancer story and conversation enters the equation. So you knitted all this together and you started your dog on a ketogenic diet, which then in turn started you down probably an unintentional path in your life towards helping others also understand what to do at that moment of crisis and confusion and scary diagnoses. Can you tell us a little bit about how that ... Talk about how you've used this overwhelming diagnosis and your point of pain then to help others?

Mike Battaglia:

Well, I guess through the simple fact of getting the information out there between the Facebook group, the Ketogenic Dog group on Facebook, and getting the information out there on the Keto Powered Canine website, so between those social media outlets and word of mouth and just one person telling the next person and their friend, and hopefully we kind of get that little snowball effect going where people start learning about these options and the potential that these diets can hold for their dog.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. And I have to assume now that ... So when did you start your Facebook group? How many years?

Mike Battaglia:

It was 2017. Emmy was diagnosed with her cancer in 2017. And literally all this happened really fast between me starting the Facebook group, me launching the website, and just hitting this all full speed, I guess so to speak, so to say.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So in the last five years, so first of all, let me tee you up, your next question is what do you love most about the work that you're doing? But let me tee that up by saying, I know in the last five years that you have received some of the same emails, notes, cards of people saying, "I just learned about ketogenic diet and it has been transformative." Those are the things that get us up in the morning and keep us going, is seeing the life-changing effects that nutrition has on certain medical conditions. And undoubtedly you have had that same experience. But let me ask you, what do you love most about the work that you're doing?

Mike Battaglia:

I love, number one, first and foremost, helping the dogs that are out there. But it also comes helping the people too. I mean, when you're in the situation of having a dog that's diagnosed with cancer or having a dog that has epilepsy, there's a lot of emotional baggage that comes along with that.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes. Yes.

Mike Battaglia:

So it's definitely, it's both of those helping the animal first and foremost, and helping the people try to get the information, figure out what needs to be done and how to do things and to see, yeah, it's feasible. If I can cook a meal in my kitchen following a recipe, I can do the same thing for my dog. You just need the guidance.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Have you found in the last five years-ish, that as your community of keto knowledgeable dog lovers, supporters, advocates grows, are you finding that your community is helping your community as people go through this life-changing experience of dealing with a dog with cancer and implementing nutrition as a powerful metabolic hammer, as Dr. Dom D'Agostino would say, for a nutritional intervention? Are you finding people in your community helping others? Are seeing kind of a ripple effect with other people helping other people?

Mike Battaglia:

I think so, but also on the flip side, there's so much disinformation out there that I think will dissuade probably a lot of people from wanting to do these sorts of things. So I think it's up to the small masses to try to show and bring the light that these things are able to be done, and we're not going to kill our dogs by feeding them raw meats, and a dog with cancer can in fact eat raw meat. Yeah, I mean, it's also good to see some of these people actually come back and say, "Oh, wow, not only have I learned through all of this how important nutrition is for my animal, but this has been a really eye-opening experience for me to focus on my own health and how I'm eating." So it's been interesting to see that aspect of it too with some people come back and it's been a really good learning experience for them, not only for their animal's health, but their own as well. All the diseases and ailments that we're seeing in our dogs these days are paralleling what's going on with the humans these days, right?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, for sure. I totally agree with you, it is when you use nutrition to modulate health, especially with dogs, and sadly because they live and die so much faster than we do, you watch their recovery on nutritional intervention also happen faster. And it can be so inspiring for humans that have their own health challenges to contemplate using nutrition as a tool. And that is one of those incredibly gratifying

moments where people decide to start caring for themselves like they care for their animals and can improve their own wellbeing by changing their nutrition. So that has to be, yes, a very powerful motivator for you for sure.

Mike Battaglia:

And what you just mentioned about how the dog's recovery can be so quick and/or swift with a nutritional intervention. A lot of these dogs that have cancer, especially if they're dogs coming from a high carbohydrate kibble diet, 9 times out of 10, these owners are beside themselves in amazement like, oh my God, my dog hasn't been this energetic or shown these such improvements ever in its life. And it's unfortunate that this is coming at a time where the dog unfortunately already has been diagnosed with cancer, but it's still a pretty powerful thing to have happen and to show these people how much nutrition really matters in our animals.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, I get that. And I so completely agree. Probably the most powerful statement that resonated with me in making the dog cancer series was one of our clients saying that their dog has never been so healthy dying that it was after a terminal diagnosis and terminal meaning metastatic cancer everywhere, which means we could slow the cancer down, but we were not going to cure this dog. But the owner saying, this is the healthiest my dog has ever been while dealing with end stage metastatic cancer. Those two really confounding statements, it's hard to stop, but when you see it, when you see animals be the leanest with the shiniest coats and have the most energy with the worst diagnosis all in one body, it hits you as veterinarians, practitioners, health advocates, it's a true statement. And when you see that over and over enough, you understand the power of nutrition, and I know that you've experienced that.

Mike Battaglia:

Yeah, and also it's important, I think, to mention that it's never too late to at least try with these animals. I mean, I've had people with 15-year-old dogs who have made amazing, what you just explained. The dog ultimately still passed away from the cancer, but the last year, year-and-a-half of that dog's life, the dog was 15, had a ketogenic diet, swimming, I think he was telling me, he was swimming between two to three miles a day with this dog throughout. It's a 15-year-old dog. This is incredible. The dog lived a great life. So yeah, it's not always about trying to beat cancer or cure cancer, but giving the dog the best quality of life living with the disease.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes, yes, yes. And so I have to ask, five years ago, you had no idea that your passion would become helping people find a nutritional intervention that could be of benefit to really sick dogs. But you're here now, and this is your passion, and you're helping lots of people help their dogs. If you, Mike, could tell the world one thing, or if you would want the world to know one thing about what you're doing, what would it be?

Mike Battaglia:

Oh, boy. Let's see. If it's only one thing that's really puts the limit on how am going to answer this.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, you can add, if you've got some subpoints, there's probably a concept with some subpoints, and you're welcome to explain.

Mike Battaglia:

Well, I guess throughout all of this, none of us can be too hard on ourselves for wishing we knew better or wishing we did better. I think there's not a single one of us that doesn't have some sort of regret wishing we did things differently, but at the end of the day, we can only continue to learn more, and from that learning implement it from this point forward in our dogs' lives. So you see a lot of regret, I think, in a lot of these owners who, I wish I did this better. I wish I knew this, or they beat themselves up, and I'm the same way. I wish I did things differently, but we can't change that. So I think a lot of it, we need to be proud of what we have done and what we're trying to do with all of our animals.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Those are really good words, Mike. Because even veterinarians, we beat ourselves up with our own animals, and people think, well, you're supposed to be the expert, or why would you have regret? I think that humans being hard on ourselves is – we're at epidemic levels of shredding ourselves for not knowing enough, not doing enough, not making enough money to be able to buy this stuff that we think would have changed things. We are really hard on ourselves as guardians, and I think if we could just stop and recognize that our goal is to do the very best we can with the resources we have, and that we have to take a deep breath and let ourselves off the hook, that that's good enough because it is. It's the best that we can do at that time, space, reality, and we have to be kind to ourselves. It's really important advice that you have spoken because people don't do it.

Mike Battaglia:

Yeah, 100%. I agree with that. I guess one other thing I would have to add is what we briefly mentioned, that yes, dogs that have cancer can in fact eat raw meat. It's not going to make them deathly ill. Now I lost my train of thought, what my other point was going to be.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But listen, I do like that point. When we were making dog cancer series, I jokingly said to the guy that was helping us build the website, how about if we include an anus shield that we could slip over a dog's tail? Because for everyone saying dogs with cancer can't have raw meat, then how are you going to prevent your dog from eating E. coli and salmonella when they lick their bum? So we should provide a butt guard, and of course, I was being silly and facetious, but the premise is dogs naturally have potentially pathogenic bacteria in their GI tract, and they're going to lick their bums every day and clean up and eat poo and eat whatever else they can find. Dogs are scavenging carnivores. They eat dead, bloated, gross things, and they have for thousands of years, and they will continue.

All of those potential contaminants, veterinarians for whatever reason, tend to forget about, and yet they're singling out USDA inspected meat as being the highest risk. And so I do think that part of this is an education needed in the veterinary spectrum, along with a good, healthy dose of common sense in recognizing that dogs will be dogs and do gross things. Even if we don't want them to lick their butts and eat poo, they're going to do it anyway. And that they are well equipped to handle fresh meat as an evolutionary food source. They've been doing it for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. So even if you forget your other points, that's still a pretty valid point to make. Mike I have to-

Mike Battaglia:

Yeah, because I think...

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, go ahead.

Mike Battaglia:

Oh, just real quick, I think that's a real big point of contention with a lot of people that find their way into my group. That's one of the first things they're advised not to do. Oh my God, you can't feed your dog with cancer raw meat. That's the last thing in the world you're going to ... It's crazy, right? That's just a really big topic of concern for these people, and I think we do a pretty good job informing them otherwise, but unfortunately, I don't think it's ever going to change in the vet industry on the advice they're going to give when it comes to raw in those situations. But in five years, over hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of dogs, we've never had one reported case of dogs getting any sort of sickness eating raw meat while they're going through their bought with cancer. I mean, you know this as well as I know this.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Right. This is a recurring theme like the Raw Feeding Veterinary Society, the group of veterinarians, raw feeding vets, we oftentimes talk about this. We're like, did you have a culture pop? I mean, in my 25 years of feeding raw food, my conventional colleagues will say, I have a dog that got sick eating raw. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, send me the culture results so I can see it." And the diagnostics have never been done. There's an assumption that if there's any GI complications pertaining to a change in diet, that it's probably related to pathogenic bacteria. But when you ask for proof or for confirmation of that, those tests, in my career, have not been done. It's veterinarians that are wildly fearful through their education that was done in a veterinary school that's sponsored by big pet food, none of them which sell human grade, fresh, raw meat diets, none of them.

Of course they're coming out indoctrinated, that anything besides feeding ultraprocessed food could potentially be very detrimental to overall health. So they graduate with that knowledge. Veterinarians are amazing people. But if they don't continue their knowledge base beyond those four years, they oftentimes are stuck with a set of beliefs that are unable to evolve or change despite science and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands, at this point of dogs, cats, and other mammals using food as nutrition, they're not going to open their minds enough to see that. So I agree with you. We do have an uphill battle when it comes to educating my beautiful colleagues on using food as medicine. But all that to say, I am thankful, Mike, that Debbie took the time out of her day to nominate you as a game changer. I appreciate that out of a point of pain and desperation in your life, you have spent the last five years educating, helping, aspiring, supporting others that are looking to use food as medicine. And I appreciate you taking time today to talk with us about this passion. Thank you.

Mike Battaglia:

Thank you. I appreciate you taking your time, and it's quite humbling to be honest with you, that you've chosen to taking the time to speak with me today about all this. So once again, thank you.