

From Chemist to Pet Health Revolutionary

Explore the unique path of Dr. Colleen Smith, who turned from chemistry to veterinary medicine, and now leads the charge in integrating acupuncture, chiropractic care, and nutrition into pet care.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- This month's Pet Game Changer is integrative veterinarian Dr. Colleen Smith, owner of the Chattanooga Holistic Animal Institute (CHAI) in Tennessee
- Dr. Colleen wanted to be a veterinarian from an early age, but was sidetracked into a career as a chemist until she eventually returned to vet school
- Unlike most veterinarians who become interested in holistic and integrative medicine, Dr. Colleen was skilled in acupuncture before she received her veterinary degree
- Dr. Colleen loves the challenge of working with "hopeless cases;" she also loves helping shape the lifelong health of her puppy patients, and she even performs acupuncture on trailered horses in the alley next to her clinic!

My guest today is integrative veterinarian Dr. Colleen Smith, who was nominated for a Game Changer award by LaRayne H. Dr. Colleen is owner of the Chattanooga Holistic Animal Institute (CHAI) in Tennessee.

"I'm so happy to be here," says Dr. Colleen. "You're such a pioneer in getting alternative veterinary medicine concepts out into the world through your wonderful book and this website. I'm just so happy to be here to share my story and hopefully, offer information for people who may feel stuck with certain treatments for their animal companions."

From Biology Major to Chemist to Veterinary School Student

I asked Dr. Colleen to talk about why she wanted to become a veterinarian, and her evolution toward more holistic and integrative practices such as **acupuncture and chiropractic**, as well as dietary therapy.

"I always wanted to be a vet since I was a kid," she explains. "But I was a beach kid in an undergrad animal science program full of farm kids. My counselor told me I wasn't going to make it in the program, and I was like, 'Okay, I guess I should switch majors,' so I became a biology major.

After I graduated, I worked as a chemist for several years and finally decided I was going back to school. So, 10 years after I graduated with a biology degree I went back to veterinary school."

Thanks to her exposure to a horse living his best life after acupuncture, Dr. Colleen became interested in the skill while still in vet school and spent two years training with an acupuncturist learning to balance eastern and western veterinary medicine.

"I got thrown in the fire right out of school, but I loved the results I was seeing with acupuncture. I quickly incorporated it into my practice, but it was tough because I was still getting my feet wet as a new veterinarian," she says.

It's really unusual for vets to add alternative medicine tools to their toolkit right out of school, as Dr. Colleen did. Typically, if it happens at all, it's after a veterinarian has burned out practicing conventional western medicine.

Offering Help to the Hopeless

Dr. Colleen runs her own small animal clinic, where she has no space to treat horses. However, there's a little alley next to her clinic, so if horse owners really need help, she allows them to trailer their animals in the alley. She performs acupuncture in the trailer!

Dr. Colleen's practice website is **Chattanooga Holistic Animal Institute**, CHAI for short, and there's also a **Facebook** and **Instagram** page. I asked her what she loves most about the work she does — what gets her up and excited each morning?

"It's a challenge," she replies. "I'm now the only deal in town, so I do a lot of second opinions. A pet parent comes in and says everything has been done for their animal. They've received a diagnosis of cancer or liver failure or some other serious disease, and they say, 'We've had all the tests, we've had all the treatments available, and nothing's working.'

It's challenging, and I love the challenge. I see mostly geriatric and older patients. When I get a puppy, I'm super excited because I'm like, 'Ooh, let's start you from the beginning with good nutrition and a minimal vaccine protocol.' I get to start them from scratch and that makes me really excited."

Finally, I asked Dr. Colleen what one thing she would tell the world, given the chance.

*"Start preventatively," she replies. "I'm so happy you're getting the word out to the world about the importance of nutrition. It's a huge hole in our profession and in human medicine. We're not looking at **nutrition as medicine** and it totally is. The body can only work as well as the substances we put into it.*

If you want to minimize the effect of genetic predisposition to disease in your animal, you want to go with whole food, species appropriate. It's preventive medicine, and it's also a treatment for diseases already in progress. I've even told people, 'If you don't change this dog's diet, they'll be on medication forever. The right food can help this animal heal!'"

LaRayne, the pet parent who recommended Dr. Colleen for a Game Changer award, had a dog with a congenital defect called micro hepatica, and her liver enzymes were off the chart. LaRayne told us that over the course of a year, Dr. Colleen's protocol helped LaRayne get her dog's liver enzymes into the normal range.

"It's really rewarding," says Dr. Colleen. "It's sad when pet owners come in and start to cry talking about what's going on with their animal. They're devastated. And it's also sad that if the disease doesn't respond to conventional treatment, their vet tells them there's nothing more they can do. So, I have a long conversation about everything the dog is taking. Flea/tick and heartworm preventives, diet, vaccines, household chemicals, air scenting products." And I tell them what I think needs to change.

With LaRayne's dog, it took a while. We rechecked liver values over the course of a year, and she was just flabbergasted when the numbers started coming down. She said, 'How can they be going down?' And I said, 'We're healing the liver. It's one of the organs that can be healed.' The dog was a bit aggressive, or grumpy, so we added some herbals. LaRayne couldn't believe it. The dog's whole attitude changed. She said, 'I have a new dog!'"

What Dr. Colleen just described is why we do what we do. The dog's diagnosis didn't change, but her quality of life and longevity were improved. She's healthier and happier. The liver is obviously detoxifying because ALT is normal. LaRayne thought the situation was hopeless, and Dr. Colleen was able to give her hope, along with a happy dog with normal liver enzymes.
