

## PODCAST EPISODE 1 - **The Pet Wellness Advocate; becoming your pet's superhero**

Hello, everyone. I'm Dr. Mike and welcome to the Pet Wellness Podcast. I'm thrilled to have you here with me today, and I'm pretty excited because this is my very first podcast. My goal in this podcast every week is to teach you simple ways to become a Pet Wellness Advocate. And being a Pet Wellness Advocate is really just taking a little more responsibility for the health and well-being of your pet by learning specific techniques on how to prevent certain diseases and behaviour problems before they become a real issue. It's funny, but the concept of Pet Wellness Advocate was really in my head almost 30 years ago when I first got into practice. Back then, I was so excited about diagnosing diseases and then treating animals and making them feel better. That was such a great feeling. But I always had this other feeling inside of me, like maybe I could actually prevent these diseases from happening in the first place. So from that day forward, I promised myself that I would hone my skills in preventing diseases rather than always looking at treatment, which is really what we were taught back in vet school. And that's what I did for the next 23 years that I was in practice, 17 of which were running my own practice in downtown Toronto.

One of the very first diseases that really caught my attention and I wanted to prevent was a disease that was very common at the time and has gotten even more common over the years. It was easy to diagnose, yet it was very hard to treat. And what made it such a horrible disease, in my opinion, is that it caused so many other diseases to surface. Well, if you haven't guessed it, the disease is obesity. In North America, this disease, of course, has become an epidemic in both people and their pets. The key to preventing any diseases, including obesity, is recognizing them early and taking action before the disease gets a true hold. The problem with obesity is that it's so hard to catch early because it's so gradual, and it kind of sneaks up on you, so you don't really notice it until it's potentially health-threatening. So what can you, as an owner, do to prevent obesity in your pet? Well, it's simply a matter of weighing your pet regularly and logging it. And although this act doesn't sound very complicated, it's actually difficult creating a new habit where you're

doing regular weight checks and recording those weights, so here's what I recommend. So let's assume you have a pet that is zero to 15 pounds. Okay, they can't be zero pounds, but let's say they're under 15 pounds. The first thing that I would recommend is to invest in a baby scale. That's right, a human baby scale. They're not horribly expensive, but they're worth every penny. Now, initially, you're going to have to get them used to this scale. And what that means is you're going to have to put them on the scale and feed them treats. Hey, wait a second. Didn't he say that we're trying to prevent obesity here? Yes, we are. You're not going to feed them a large quantity of treats. You're going to feed them a small quantity of low-calorie treats, just enough to get them used to the scale so they enjoy going on there so that you can now weigh them every month and record it. And of course, if you see any trends to the upside or the downside, you can let your veterinarian know immediately. They will think you are a hero because you've helped them in diagnosing your cat with either a weight gain problem or a weight loss problem. It's a win-win. And although we're on the topic of obesity and I just mentioned the word weight loss, I can't tell you how important it is when your pet becomes a senior for measuring weight for weight loss because there are so many diseases in dogs and cats that the only clinical sign is weight loss. And just like weight gain, you're not going to see it because it's gradual. So diseases like hyperthyroidism in cats and chronic kidney disease in cats and dogs can be diagnosed so much earlier if you just alert your veterinarian that your pet is losing weight. Okay, so what about those middle-weight pets sort of over 15 pounds and maybe under 60 pounds? Well, for most of you, I would just invest in a regular scale that you can stand on with your pet and then put your pet down, weigh yourself and subtract the difference. And that's the weight of your pet. And you would record that weight every month or every two months and look for trends. What about the very large pets that are over 60 pounds? Well, you have a couple of choices. You can either create a jig on your scale at home, or you may have to take them to your veterinary clinic, where they have these very large scales that are quite expensive, and you can get an accurate weight there. Yes, I realize that travelling to your vet clinic every month or two to weigh your dog can be a bit of a pain, but if it means saving your dog from a potentially dangerous disease, I think it's a small price to pay. There is one huge advantage of taking your dog to a clinic regularly that I try to talk to my clients about on a regular basis. The fact is that greater than 90% of pets are afraid to go into clinics. And no, that's not because we stick needles in them. It has nothing

to do with that. It has everything to do with the fact that it's a novel environment. They have to deal with new people, potentially new pets that they see, new smells that they've never smelled before. It can be a scary place for an animal, especially if they haven't been there in a year. A perfect comparison in my mind is a child going back to school after being off for the summer. I know they're excited to go back, but it's a little bit scary for them as they really don't know what to expect when they get there. So imagine for a second how much less intimidating a clinic setting would be for your dog if you took them there every couple of months. They got to sit on a scale while a veterinary staff member fussed over them and perhaps gave them a few yummy treats. Easy peasy, right? It's another classic example of a win-win situation where you get to trend your dog's weight while they get used to the clinic at the same time.

Okay, so let's switch gears for a little bit. I'd like to share with you why I personally would like to encourage everyone who's listening to take more responsibility for their pet's health. I actually have two compelling reasons. The first reason begins with the importance of a pet's history in the prevention and diagnosis of disease. And I always knew how important history was, which was the reason why I asked my clients so many upfront questions to the point where I think I may have annoyed them at times. In the past year and a half, that conviction has gotten even stronger. That was when I started my own telemedicine practice. And for those of you who aren't familiar with the concept of telemedicine, it's essentially medicine done over the phone or via video call. I can learn a lot by speaking with the owner, and I can visually examine the pet if we're on video. But I can't actually touch the pet, which is, of course, one of the biggest shortcomings of telemedicine. I can certainly get the owner to help me when it comes to looking at the dog's gums or checking in the dog's eyes, but they certainly can't help me listen to the dog's heart. That being said, getting a good, thorough history of the pet can give me huge insights where a full physical examination isn't 100% necessary. A perfect example of the magic of telemedicine is dealing with pet behaviour problems, and that's because I don't need to touch any dog or cat to be able to diagnose or treat a behaviour problem. All you need is a really accurate pet history. So what does a pet history have to do with you? Well, actually, it has everything to do with you because you know your pet better than anyone else, and only you can share your pet's history with your

veterinarian. So I want you all to really realize how important you are in the prevention and diagnosis of disease in your pet.

Okay, now on to the second reason why I want you all to become Pet Wellness Advocates. One of the things that has always been a source of frustration for me in all my years of practicing veterinary medicine is how so many people completely entrust veterinarians with the care of their pets almost blindly sometimes, if I could be so bold. But I realized that putting your trust into a professional is such a common theme in today's world. After all, these folks are experts in the field, aren't they? I want to take a moment to share with you one of my own experiences and trusting professionals with something that I actually knew nothing about. It all started way back when I graduated from vet school. I got my first real job and my first regular paycheck. At the time, I was single, and I was living above the clinic, where the rent was pretty decent. So all I had in terms of expenses was rent, food, my car, and a gym membership that I never used, thanks to my naive belief in New Year's resolutions. So I decided to take some money from every paycheck and invest it. I went to my local bank and sat down with a financial advisor. They sat and talked to me about things. I had no clue what they were saying. I didn't know what a mutual fund was. I didn't know what a mean expense ratio was. I didn't know any of that stuff. They just kept talking, and I looked like I was listening, and I gave them my money and they put it into fund A, fund B, and fund C. That was it. To make a long story short, forward many years and probably six or so financial advisors, and I decided one day that I was going to become an advocate for my own financial health. So I went to Chapters and picked up my very first financial book. It was called "The Lazy Investor". And I must admit, it was a pretty good read. I actually read two or three other books after that, and I started to feel like I was starting to understand the lingo of the financial world. Could I now invest by myself? Absolutely not. I still needed a professional. However, now I knew enough to be dangerous. Kind of like where I want all of you to be one day when it comes to chatting with your veterinarian, just knowing enough to be dangerous. What that knowledge allowed me to do was to now interview financial advisors. I could ask intelligent questions and get the answers that I was looking for. And it was through that knowledge that I was able to find Kevin, my current and hopefully my last financial advisor. And Kevin and I have a unique relationship where we work

together as a team. He's my financial advisor, he's the expert. But we chat about my investments together, and when he counsels me on suggestions, I actually understand them, which gives me comfort that I'm actually being an advocate for my own financial health. So what can we learn from this example? Well, the biggest take home for me is that not all professionals within the same field have the same set of skills, and one has to actually do some research in order to find the right one for you. It's funny, but when I was the owner of my own practice, I poured my heart into the practice and aside from the odd chat with a fellow colleague, I had no idea how other clinics operated. So even then, I assumed that we are all fairly equal in terms of skill set and the way we practiced. It wasn't until a few years ago when I started working for a global animal health company and started visiting hundreds of practices all over Canada that I witnessed two unique things. The first was that veterinarians are lovely people and most of them want what's best for your pet. The second was that there were major differences in how veterinarians practice, what their clinics look like, what equipment they used, and even differences in their personalities. So I wanted to outline some of those differences so that you as a consumer could make an informed decision about what you want from your veterinarian. As a pet wellness advocate, I want you to be able to team up with your veterinarian like I did with Kevin, my financial advisor.

The first big difference is the level of experience that a veterinarian has, and there are advantages and disadvantages to those levels of experience. Let's chat about new graduates, the folks that are fresh out of that school. The advantage that these folks bring to the table is they come out of school knowing the latest drugs and the newest technologies, which is quite impressive. However, the big disadvantage is when they come out of school, they're kind of a little green when it comes to skill level. Let's take me as a perfect example. When I graduated back in '93, I remember it taking me almost 2 hours to spay a dog, something I could probably do in a quarter of that time a few years later. So a veterinarian who has been around for a number of years will certainly have an advanced set of skills to bring to the table. However, I will say that having a lot of experience isn't always an asset. In order for experience to be an asset, you have to be willing to grow, which also means you have to be willing to change. Now, this is not going to be news to anybody, but as we know, most people are resistant to change and veterinarians are no different.

So here's an example to illustrate what I'm talking about. I remember when I graduated from vet school, and I was in practice, I was using this suture material to stitch up animals on the inside. That was a braided material, and therefore it was really easy to tie knots with. Anyway, about 15 years went by, and they came up with a brand new suture material, and it was designed to be a lot less inflammatory to the tissues because instead of being braided, it was a single filament. Now, the problem with that is that it was a lot harder to tie knots with. So essentially, it was a bit of a learning curve if you were going to start to use this material. And that was a crucial time in veterinary medicine. In my mind, as a veterinarian, you could either continue on with a material that they've been using for a long time and something that you're used to and didn't really have any problems with, or you can move to something that was a little bit better. Not a lot better, but a little better, knowing that deep down, the animal's inflammatory response would be less than if you use the old material. My decision was simple, use the new material and just figure it out. And I did, and I got to be just as good at using the new material as I was the old material. And if we want to talk about resistance to change, I will just tell you that that old material is still available today and used quite often.

Which brings me to the second big difference between veterinarians, their opinions on innovation. In 1962, a brilliant man named E. M. Rogers came out with his Diffusion of Innovation Theory. And if you're sitting beside a computer right now, I encourage you to type Diffusion of Innovation in Google and just look at the bell chart that will come up. This theory is really one of the oldest social science theories, and it was designed originally to explain how new ideas gain momentum, and it definitely has staying power. In fact, I've seen it in three completely different genres that I've read recently, and it definitely applies to veterinary medicine today. So if you look at the bell curve of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, there are only five spots on the curve, and it starts off on the left side with the top two or 3% of people. We call them Innovators. And those are folks that are extremely smart and come up with all the new ideas that we see in veterinary medicine, like the folks who invented that monofilament suture that I was telling you about earlier. The next stage makes up about 12% to 13% of the population of what we refer to as Early Adopters. I like to put myself into that category. Early adopters are veterinarians who are willing to try new things that these Innovators are creating.

They may have to give up something they're comfortable with in order to try something new. That might help an animal in any way, shape, or form. Next in line are the Early Majority, which make up 34% of the population, and they essentially look at what the early adopters do. And once the early adopters have given it the seal of approval, they jump in. The Late Majority are next and they also make up about 34% of the population. They follow the lead of the early majority, and finally, they're the Laggards, and they make up the last 16% of the population. These are the veterinarians that are extremely resistant to change. They've been practicing a certain way for a really long time, and nothing new is going to stray them off their current path. If you've ever had the pleasure of reading the book, "Start with Why", by Simon Sinek, you would have enjoyed his example of a laggard. Laggards, in his mind are people who would continue to use Rotary phones if they were still available today. My example of a laggard would be a little different. It would be a veterinarian who continues to use anesthetic drugs that were popular in the '90s because that is what they've used for so long and gotten used to. What you need to figure out is where your veterinarian stands in that bell curve.

I want to share an example with you about how important it is to be an early adopter. About 18 years ago, I was approached by a company who was bringing out a brand new pre-anesthetic drug, essentially a tranquilizer to use before surgery. It was highly innovative and they wanted me to be a beta tester, and I jumped at the opportunity. The tranquilizer that I was using at the time, I was extremely comfortable with, but I will admit that it had a number of inherent flaws. The first one was that although animals were heavily sedated with this drug, they were extremely noise sensitive. So I remember in my first year of practice, we had this 130-pound mastiff who was really vicious and would not let you touch his feet at all. So we had to sedate him heavily with that tranquilizer, and there we would be laying down, making no movement whatsoever, and you drop a coin and he would literally lunge at you for 2 seconds and then boom, right back to sleep. That's how sensitive he was. I remember that we had to actually muzzle him even though he was sedated because even the sound of the clippers would set them off. I'm not going to lie, those were pretty stressful nail trims. The second problem with this drug is that it lowered blood pressure, which wasn't a big deal in normal animals, but it could be really dangerous in certain patients, like those that had, for instance,

heart disease. Finally, I was always bothered that it often took six to 8 hours for the sedative to wear off so that big, huge mastiff would walk out of the clinic literally drunk, which always made me feel bad. This new tranquillizer that I was looking into has some real big-time benefits. The first big benefit is that the noise sensitivity part was gone. You could turn the vacuum on, and these animals would still be sound asleep. The blood pressure thing was also not an issue. What I love the most is that this drug was completely reversible. Yes, that means that you could literally turn it off whenever you wanted to. I could take an animal that was sound asleep, give them an injection of a reversal agent, and within less than a minute, they'd be standing there looking at you like nothing had ever happened. It was a miracle in my mind. Just think about the versatility of a product like this. We could take a dog and heavily sedate them for x-rays of their hips, and we wouldn't have to hurt them. We wouldn't have to scare them. And then, boom, just give them an injection of a reversal agent, and they can go home as awake as they did when they came in. Okay. Sounds too good to be true, right? Actually, no. But there was one minor flaw in this product. And when I say flaw, I shouldn't really use that word because it wasn't a problem with the product. It was just something that happened that might scare you unless you really understood why it was happening. Let me explain. One thing that happened when you gave this drug is that an animal's heart rate would typically slow down, not to a level that you'd be really frightened, but sometimes it would make you a little nervous. The good news is their blood pressure was fine, and a lot of times their circulation was perfectly fine as well. So the reason for the drop in heart rate was really a physiological one. Meaning that the drug caused the heart rate to slow down purposely. Now I remember one moment where I gave a husky this drug, and his heart rate dropped to 40, which, although is far away from zero, is also far away from what's normal for that breed. And I checked his blood pressure, and it was fine. And I looked at his gums, and they were nice and pink and moist, and I ended up not worrying anymore. We ended up doing the surgery, and the dog did great. At the end of the day, I have never had a single problem with this tranquillizer ever. And 18 years later, it has now become the most popular pre-anesthetic drug in veterinary medicine. The reason why I'm telling you this is not to say that someone who uses tranquillizer A is better than someone who uses tranquillizer B, or the person using tranquillizer B is wrong. It's really a matter of saying that I think as a consumer, you probably need to have a conversation with your veterinarian as to what kind of anesthetic protocol they're using and then be

comfortable with it. And if you are that's great. And if you're not well, then you can have a discussion with them and come up with a solution that's best for your pet.

Okay, onto the third big difference between veterinarians and this is a biggie. It's actually their philosophy of practice. And in this scenario, you essentially fall into one of three camps. First, there are those veterinarians who practice entirely Western medicine. Then there are those who practice holistic, natural or Eastern medicine. And then there's people like me that fall somewhere in between. I want to spend a moment highlighting the unique advantages and disadvantages of both Western medicine and natural medicine, so you can see why I chose to be somewhere in the middle. Drugs are the cornerstone of Western medicine, and when used appropriately, they are faster and stronger than anything I could ever find with natural medicine. In certain cases, like type one diabetes, they can literally save lives. Drugs are thoroughly tested, and they're proven, period. If your dog has osteoarthritis and you give him a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, his lameness will go away. But the flip side to that coin is that most, if not all, drugs have side effects. And in some instances, one could argue that the side effects are worse than the disease itself. Certain chemotherapy drugs come to mind in this scenario. Natural medicines, on the other hand, are not as fast or not as potent as most drugs, but if used appropriately, tend to have a lot less side effects and improve potency over time. So aside from the side effects, sounds like drugs are the clear winner here. Well, actually, not always. Let's talk about that. A perfect example to illustrate my point is osteoarthritis, something that every dog and every cat eventually is going to get. In a Western medicine scenario, you would bring your older dog or your older cat into your veterinarian with a complaint of lameness. Then your veterinarian would examine your dog or cat and likely recommend x-rays of the offending limb. In this scenario, the x-ray is going to show that your pet has osteoarthritis, a type of arthritis that older pets typically get. Then they may or may not recommend blood work. And then put your dog or cat on a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, which helps relieve inflammation and pain, which is great. Unfortunately, arthritis doesn't get better. It only gets worse, which means there's a really good likelihood that your pet is going to be on this non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug for life or until some of the side effects that this drug can cause start to show up. And that's when things turn from great to not so great. At that

point, your veterinarian may be forced to turn to a natural alternative, which obviously is not going to work nearly as fast as the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, but has a lot less side effects. Because natural medicines typically take a little longer to work than drugs, most natural practitioners want to think about things in a preventative way. In other words, get your pet on these natural anti-inflammatories early in the disease process, and that's where you, as a pet wellness advocate, come into the picture. This is where you start paying attention to the earliest signs of osteoarthritis, like your dog taking an extra second to get up from a lying position or your cat being tentative before jumping on the chair. Or maybe they're just a little slower going up the stairs. Then we can start them on natural anti-inflammatory products before they show any true signs of lameness. And then if you're like me and you subscribe to both the natural medicine way and the Western medicine way, you've started an animal on a natural product with very few side effects, and you keep them on that until eventually, they become lame. And then you have a potent non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug in your back pocket that you can use to help alleviate pain. And if I haven't screamed it from the rooftops, you are the most important part of that equation because only you will let us know if something is wrong with your pet.

The final difference between veterinarians is their personalities. And I'll tell you, I've met them all. I've met introverts. I've met extroverts. I've met vets who are business-oriented. I've met vets who are a little overconfident. At the end of the day, you just want to make sure that you find someone who is kind, compassionate, and empathetic, and not just to you, but to your pet.

Well, that's a lot of information for one podcast. I'm going to leave you with a couple of summary tips. We talked about how important a pet's history is to your veterinarian, so I want to encourage you all from this day forward to keep a log of everything that your pet does that's abnormal. Just keep a log of it. Next time you go to your veterinarian, take that book with you and let them know everything that you've seen. Hey, you know what? Your vet might go "That's normal. That's normal. That's great." So then you know it's normal. But what if it's abnormal? Then guess what? You were the one who was able to catch something early before it was a real

problem, and that's got to be a good feeling. And finally, make sure you team up with a veterinarian who is right for you. Don't just blindly entrust them with the care of your pet.

Thank you so much for joining me here today. And remember, our pets deserve our best.