

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Functional Medicine Resolves Chronic Conditions in Pets



by John B. Smith, DVM

“Functional medicine” is a very recent addition to the alternative/complementary medicine spectrum. Although it has been evolving since the early 20th century, its formal inception occurred in 1991 when Jeffrey Bland, PhD, founded the Institute of Functional Medicine (IFM). Functional medicine is also closely associated with naturopathic medicine — since Dr. Bland is one of the co-founders of Bastyr University, one of the three colleges of naturopathic medicine in this country.

Functional medicine deals with the prevention and treatment of the underlying causes of chronic disease by addressing core clinical imbalances, to restore each patient’s functionality and health. When functional medicine works really well, the only change for the patient is a change of diet. Many times the body has the capacity to remain in balance once well-being is restored.

Functional medicine is a complement to allopathic medicine, not an alternative or replacement. In common with holistic medical systems such as traditional Chinese medicine, functional medicine recognizes the interconnections between the mind, body, and spirit.

The principles of functional medicine include a belief in biochemical individuality (the importance of individual variations in metabolic function) and a focus on patient-centered treatment, which emphasizes “patient care” rather than “disease care.” Also, functional medicine defines health as “positive vitality” — not just the absence of disease. Finally, it recognizes the homeodynamic nature of health and disease, in which the body constantly undergoes physiologic and metabolic processes.

Functional medicine is often described as the crossroads where nutrition and genetics meet. As such, it does not view genetics as destiny, but instead recognizes that genes must be activated and can be deactivated. This occurs when harmful chemicals are taken into the body with food or by exposure to the environment. One can see the power of this insight in the assertion by the IFM that 97% of all human cancers are preventable.



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I was a veterinarian for over 30 years when I became involved with functional medicine, due to a health problem that I developed seven years ago. I had a type of tendonitis called "trigger finger," which causes one's fingers to become locked if one grips anything too tightly.

Conventional medicine's treatment of trigger finger is surgical. I would have been open to that, except I was told that the surgery would have to be repeated every three years. I was doubtful that the surgery would be successful more than once or twice. With the help of the Internet and finding functional medicine through the IFM, I found a better solution to my problem.

With the analysis provided by functional medicine, I found out that I am gluten sensitive, and that this was the reason behind my trigger finger. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. By the time a diagnosis was made, I also had chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia-like symptoms. All of my symptoms are now gone, and stay away as long as I don't eat gluten.

I learned functional medicine "the hard way" by dealing with my illnesses, but I later also benefited from the many educational opportunities that the IFM provides practitioners.

Many of the members of the IFM have similar personal experiences that bring them to functional medicine. Functional medicine examines the core clinical imbalances that underlie various disease conditions, of which food allergies are just one example. Other precursors to disease include imbalances of hormones or neurotransmitters, oxidation reduction, immune system imbalances, inflammation, and digestive, absorptive, and microbiological imbalances. Improving these imbalances – in the patient's environmental inputs and in the body's fundamental physiological processes – is the path to restoring health.

Functional medicine focuses on functionality at many levels, rather than a single treatment for a single diagnosis. Functional medicine also uses the patient's story as a key tool for integrating diagnosis, signs, symptoms, and clinical imbalances into a comprehensive approach to improve health and functionality.

However, my patients are of the four-legged variety. As far as I know, I am the only veterinarian applying the IFM paradigm to the treatment of animals. I decided to try it on animals after it was so helpful to me. All practitioners are presented with patients they cannot seem to help. I was in hope that functional medicine would be useful for those poor creatures that seemed beyond help.

With a little tweaking, functional medicine has worked wonderfully on pets. I still see some patients that do not respond to treatment, but not nearly as many as before. Utilizing functional medicine in my practice has been an exciting and invigorating experience. Were it not for functional medicine, I would be retired by now!

"As far as I know, I am the only veterinarian applying the Institute of Functional Medicine paradigm to the treatment of animals...With a little tweaking, functional medicine has worked wonderfully on pets."

Many of my patients come to me with a history of being on antibiotics and/or steroids for years. One of my favorite patients is good example of the power of functional medicine to unravel complex chronic illness. Gracie is a five-year-old Doberman who was suffering from severe itching, dermatitis, and hair loss when I first saw her. She had been on antibiotics for four of her five years. Every time an attempt was made to discontinue antibiotics, the itching and dermatitis would return.

Analysis of organics acids in Gracie's urine pointed to an imbalance of intestinal bacteria. A comprehensive stool analysis revealed that she had a small intestinal overgrowth of lactobacillus, partially due to the probiotics she was being given. Discontinuing the probiotics and suppressing the overgrowth — with botanicals, not antibiotics — along with nutritional support, has completely resolved Gracie's dermatitis. She recently appeared in an ad in *Hot Rod* magazine with her shiny, healthy coat.

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In addition to skin disease and allergies, many veterinary patients come to me with chronic gastrointestinal (GI) disease. Functional medicine gives one the perspective and tools to sort out classic “abdominal mysteries” — be they pancreatitis, hepatitis, or simply vomiting and/or diarrhea.

Many other diseases are connected to GI tract dysfunction in less obvious ways. Abby, a 12-year-old Labrador, came to me two years ago because of recurrent bladder infections caused by E. coli bacteria. Antibiotics provided only temporary relief.

“Functional medicine allows for true prevention, rather than simply early detection.”

The underlying cause of Abby’s bladder issues was a condition called “leaky gut.” Her small intestine had become “leaky” because of food hypersensitivities, which allowed bacteria to translocate to her bladder. Restoring normal GI tract function, along with support for her bladder, has resolved all of Abby’s leaks.

Another common disease with a connection to the GI tract is feline asthma. Marley is a 12-year-old domestic shorthair who was taking several hundred dollars of drugs every month for asthma when I first saw her. Resolving her food allergies and restoring a normal balance of GI microflora has enabled Marley to lead a drug-free life.

Sometimes disease will be caused by dietary deficiencies. Tuko is a two-year-old Schnauzer who suffered a grand mal seizure. Tuko does not have epilepsy; rather, her seizure was associated with inadequate blood levels of several minerals and amino acids, in spite of being fed an excellent diet.

It turns out that Tuko’s requirement for these nutrients is much higher than most dogs. Biochemical individuality is one of the fundamental tenets of functional medicine, so determining her special need for additional supplements was the key to her recovery.

An emphasis on prevention is another pillar of functional medicine. Charlie is a Standard Poodle who was brought to me as a puppy. His owners’ charge to me was to prevent Charlie from dying from cancer at a young age, as their previous two poodles had. (Actually, cancer is so common in all dogs and cats that standard poodles don’t stand out in this regard. Present estimates are that 50% of pet dogs and cats get cancer.)

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When Charlie was three years old, we ran several laboratory tests that are unique to functional medicine. We were able to determine that he was developing imbalances in his colon that are associated with colon cancer. Hopefully, the supplements we prescribed will enable Charlie to dodge that bullet. Functional medicine allows for true prevention, rather than simply early detection.

From a functional medicine perspective, chronic diseases remind me of the nursery rhyme “How the Kingdom Was Lost.” The kingdom was lost because of a missing horseshoe nail, which prevented the messenger from riding the horse, which prevented the king from being warned of an invading enemy, who took over the kingdom. Nobel Prize-winning chemist Linus Pauling, one of the progenitors of functional medicine, is quoted as saying that “all illness begins with a mineral deficiency.” With functional medicine, we can detect that deficiency before the kingdom is lost.

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