

Central Line: The AAHA Podcast Transcript

Episode Title: Making Hard Things Easy to Talk About

Guest: Cherice Roth, DVM, MS

0:00:04.2 Katie Berlin: Hi, welcome back to Central Line. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Berlin, and our guest this week is somebody who I feel like we've been trying to connect with for a while. A bunch of us in the industry, I feel like we just slide past each other like ships in the night, and Dr. Cherice Roth, you and I have been like that. I'm really excited that we get a chance to connect today. Thank you so much for coming and spending this time with us.

0:00:30.1 Cherice Roth: Absolute pleasure. Yeah, I agree. Vet med is so small, but then there are definitely people, I'm like, "How have I not met you before?"

0:00:37.2 Katie Berlin: I know, and then we meet and it's like, okay, now I know why we were supposed to meet!

0:00:42.2 Cherice Roth: Yes.

0:00:43.0 Katie Berlin: This is a good thing. So yeah, I'm very, very stoked about this conversation, and hopefully we'll have more than one conversation because I know we have a lot to talk about. But before we get started, for any listeners who aren't familiar with you and what you're doing, would you mind just giving us a little intro and some info about yourself?

0:01:03.2 Cherice Roth: Yeah, absolutely, I'm Dr. Cherice Roth. I am Chief Veterinary Officer of Fuzzy Pet Health, which is a virtual care platform that uses digital care along with E-commerce to make sure that pet parents have appropriate access to veterinary knowledge and veterinary care for their pets. I am a mom times two, of two boys, and I'm also a children's book author times two, and a practicing veterinarian as well, I love still going and doing relief shifts and working in hospital. That's pretty much me in a nutshell.

0:01:37.3 Katie Berlin: That is definitely the nutshell version of you, that's a lot in that nutshell. How did you get all that into that nutshell?

0:01:46.6 Cherice Roth: I swear I sleep. I promise, like it's required.

0:01:48.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah, I'm not sure. I don't know if I believe you. But yeah, that's all sorts of fantastic things, and certainly you are proving that if you really want to do something, you'll find a way to do it.

0:02:00.4 Cherice Roth: Yes.

0:02:00.5 Katie Berlin: So before we jump into the episode, I always like to know a little bit about our guests on a personal level. So I wanted to ask you the billboard question. If you could put one thing on a billboard, or a tweet if you're a Twitter person, that our entire profession could see every morning on their way to work, what would it be?

0:02:24.5 Cherice Roth: Well, I doctor very much like I mom, and so it would actually be "Be kind and listen." And that's more than just for our field, it's something that I think is cross-

functional in so many ways, cross-barrier in so many ways - it really does come down to those two things. Being kind and listening.

0:02:47.2 Katie Berlin: I love that. And listening, I'm finding, is a common theme - actually kindness and listening are a common theme among our guests, and I think that means we're picking the right guests.

0:03:04.0 Cherice Roth: I'm partial, but I think you did a great job.

0:03:07.4 Katie Berlin: Same, same. Okay, so you mentioned a whole lot of things in your bio, but you are a children's book author. Does it ever get old saying that, or is it just awesome every time you have to say that?

0:03:21.9 Cherice Roth: It's super weird. But, yeah, it's really fun. The whole thing has just been so fun.

0:03:28.5 Katie Berlin: What motivated you to write those books? I hadn't heard about them. And then when I went on and looked at them online, I was so taken by, "Why didn't anybody do this before?" So I just really want to know, what was the motivation and the kick that made you do it?

0:03:49.2 Cherice Roth: Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head. Why hadn't anybody done this before? So I've got my two boys and they got to watch me do things with our critters, and so they have this very real idea that "my mom is a doctor," and I've listened to them have conversations about it back and forth, and hilarity ensues. And so I kind of really did think about, I'm sure they're having this conversation at school.

So that's kind of how *What's A Real Doctor?* came about. It's just how we explain what I do on a child's level, so that part was extremely fun. Book two, however, is definitely something that is honestly more near and dear to my heart because it's not just about veterinary medicine, it's *What Does a Real Doctor Look Like*, and just the title gives me the feels every time. And it's because - where was that when I was little? I didn't meet my first veterinarian until my third year in undergrad.

0:04:52.1 Katie Berlin: That's crazy.

0:04:52.9 Cherice Roth: And so it was not on my mind, it was nowhere near, anywhere near my mind as far as something that I could actually do. I didn't meet anything outside of a pediatrician until I was an adult as well, and so just thinking about... I'm not an outlier here, it is definitely the representation and being able to see yourself.

So much of mind work and positivity is about being able to visualize, but if you literally can't see it, how in the world can you visualize it? And that's how book two came about. It's about my two nieces that are sisters. I am very into sibling interactions because I think they're just some of the most fascinating conversations, I'm the oldest of five children. And we've had some doozies. So it's about these two girls that are talking to each other in the privacy of their bedroom, like, "Do I look like a doctor?" And they honestly don't know the answer, and it's at that point that they meet me, and we're able to have a conversation about what real doctors look like. So that's why that came about. It's something that is not talked about, and it should be.

0:06:10.4 Katie Berlin: I love that so much. So the first book is *What's A Real Doctor?* And the second one is *What Does a Real Doctor Look Like?*

0:06:17.0 Cherice Roth: That's right.

0:06:18.3 Katie Berlin: And we'll make sure we put links to those in the show notes because I'm sure people are going to want to check them out - and they can get signed copies online.

0:06:25.6 Cherice Roth: They can.

0:06:26.9 Katie Berlin: I love both of these. All vets I think, love the idea of “what's a real doctor” because we've always had people being like, "Oh, are you a vet or a real doctor?" And it's like, "Okay, how many species did you have to study?"

0:06:47.1 Cherice Roth: Right?

0:06:47.2 Katie Berlin: But then of course, there's the idea that... I grew up knowing I could be a veterinarian. We had cats that went to the vet, that was part of our culture. I got to go all the time with my parents to the vet's office and meet a vet when I was very little. I was into horses, and so I saw the horse vet all the time. It was just a given that if I wanted to, I could grow up to be a vet, and that is such a huge privilege. I had no idea that that exposure and that assumption that I could do whatever I wanted was such a gift. And so from my perspective, these books not only are amazing for the kids who don't grow up knowing those things, but also for kids who grew up like me, having to realize that not everybody in the world is like us and that we are extremely lucky.

0:07:43.8 Cherice Roth: Yeah, I think that that's a huge point. Obviously, the children on the cover are African-American children and they're little girls, which is almost kind of the antithesis of what you think when you think “doctor” in the US. And because of that, one of the things that I really did think about was, "Is that going to make non-Black families feel like this book isn't for them?" But if you can get past judging the book by its cover, there are important lessons in there. It's talking about physical characteristics, fat, skinny, tall, short, different abilities, male, female, and anywhere in between. There are so many lessons in there. It's not even a thing.

And the way that I put it together is that really you can pick out any page and have it become a conversation, and that was really the goal of it, of whatever that family is focusing on - if it's gender equality discussions, if it's being able to recognize things like the American Disability Act and how you talk to your children about that, all of those sorts of things are woven into this book. It's not just about skin color. I think that there's, honestly, an important component to that, because that is the focus of the book, but there are definitely parts in that book for every parent and for every child.

0:09:17.3 Katie Berlin: That's fantastic. And so important to know because the whole mission is to not have people judge a book by its cover, as a person being judged by what you look like is never a good thing. I do believe that this message has tremendous benefit for every family. And even if you don't have kids - I don't have kids - I think the book is an important reminder for me and in how I relate to people that I interact with just within the profession, so I love all of that.

I think on the one hand, a children's book seems like such a small thing, it's just a story, we grew up

with stories. And on the other hand, children's books had such a huge impact on me growing up. I'm a huge book nerd now, and I credit my parents. I have books behind me - if you're watching the video, you can see that was the first thing I set up in this office when we moved.

But kids' books can profoundly shape memories and childhoods, and they can do it even in a passive way, I think. There are a lot of families where I think people are uncomfortable talking about these issues, and I was just wondering how important it is to you that these books start a conversation within the family versus the kids passively absorbing these messages that they can be doctors no matter what they look like, and that they can't judge other people by what they look like.

0:10:50.4 Cherice Roth: Yeah, yeah, I love that question. So it's kind of two-fold. I think that for the people that don't have children, but understand the value of the books, the way, especially inside this profession, to help get that message out that we're a real doctor, is to find a local elementary school, purchase copy, donate it. If there are programs and things like that around you for various socio-economic backgrounds, donating those books is a great way, even without children in the household, to start to really have those conversations and unfold these lessons for all children, because not every parent can buy books for their kids.

And then outside of that, I think that the lesson around books being more than just entertainment is something that's often lost. I love to read, I read all different types of books, and honestly, when I was younger, that was my way of escaping, that was my way of traveling and learning more, and I think that these books do that same thing. It gives you these snapshots as a child of, what? Of course, in each illustration, in *What's A Real Doctor*, I'm working on a different species.

0:12:02.0 Katie Berlin: Love it.

0:12:04.8 Cherice Roth: Those are the things that children are going to pull out of like, "Wait what? Turtles can go to the vet too? Horses can go to the vet?" And it keeps it from just being something that you're a dog and cat doctor, to really expanding that vision of what a veterinarian is. And so of course, that leads to all sorts of different kinds of questions.

On the cover of the book, I even have a little bird in my pocket. It's clear that we do it all and we're everything to these little critters and they're everything to us, and so that's sort of the point of that, and that it does and should open up those conversations about pet care and vaccines and surgery and recovering, all of those things that are really important to what we do that make us a real doctor.

And then in book two, I think it does a great job of being non-confrontational about a topic that really can be hard, especially if you are a non-Black family trying to have this discussion with your children around diversity and representation and what it means to see yourself as somebody.

And so I think it does do a good job of making it easier because it broaches the subject of, "Oh, of course, a doctor can look like anything." And I mean my kids will call me on... If I say something that's obvious they're like, "Duh, mom." And they're six and seven, so I don't know what teenagers they're going to look like, but they call me on it.. Then actually, there are populations of people that it's not common knowledge, it's not normal. One of the best stories that I have about *What Does a Real Doctor Look Like?* was a colleague of mine that purchased it for his daughter, and he showed her the cover, and she was like, "I don't need to read this book. I know what a real doctor looks like," and he was like, "Bring it. What does it look like?" And she said, "I know that he is a doctor."

Basically, it's a male, and that she really did not make that connection that it can be women and actually in veterinary medicine it's mostly women now.

So I think it even hit home for him, He got the book and sent me a picture of her with the book and told me her reply, and he said, "You know what? I didn't even realize that she really did need this book." But this was the book she needed to be able to start to have that conversation of actually, no, it's not just a boy, it's not just a girl, and that they can be any color. So just having those sorts of moments let me know that the book did its job. I feel like it'll get into the hands of the children that really do need it.

0:14:57.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, I love that story. Kids are sponges, and so they're soaking up messages whether we know it or not, and even if we're not sure if they've soaked up a certain message, it's probably never a bad idea to put more of that message in front of them.

0:15:16.0 Cherice Roth: Totally. Repetition, repetition.

0:15:18.0 Katie Berlin: Could we ever do too much on this one? I don't think so. And even among adults too.

I'm kidless, so I have not had to have that job, but in interacting with colleagues, for instance, being in environments where not everybody is open to having these conversations and where a lot of people are afraid of saying the wrong thing or who feel like maybe there isn't a problem that affects them, books like yours, even though they're technically, I guess, designed for kids - do you feel like they open up a door for adults to have those difficult conversations too? Maybe because it's a little bit safer?

0:16:14.2 Cherice Roth: I do, I think it definitely opens the door. The other aspect of it that I think is super important is that I highly encourage adults to read the book too, because it allows us to check our own biases. And we were very careful, when we were thinking about the illustrations, of making sure that everyone seemed represented, and that is something that you can often take for granted as well. It is not uncommon for me to be a speaker at an event and be the only person of color in the entire room, and then for the people that are not people of color, for that to be in reverse, that's when it starts to be really clear - "Oh, I could see how..." Not that it feels necessarily bad, but it gets your attention, and so I think that it also does a nice job of really showing, hey, yeah, this can be really hard to talk about, but also it can be really easy. It can be just as simple as, "Yeah, doctors look like us. Who is us? All of us."

0:17:23.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah. I love that. This can be really hard to talk about, but also it can be really easy.

0:17:27.1 Cherice Roth: It really can. Look, we're a Type A. But really, sometimes it's over-complicated. Children are children, they're going to play with whoever they want to play with, they're going to see that person as a person, and then it's really up to us to continue to have that be the norm.

0:17:56.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah, love that so much. Do you think that you'll expand and do more that touch on different veterinary career paths?

0:18:14.2 Cherice Roth: So book three is actually away with the editor, we're working on it now, and it's *What Does A Real Doctor Do?* And this one actually explores all of the different types of doctorates, and so it talks about PhDs and JDs, of course, DVMs will be in there, MDs will be in there, DOs will be in there, to hopefully open a world, and the company behind it is called The Real Doctor company, that's my company.

But I really do think that there's an opportunity for us to expand that into every type of career path and that really, the Real Doctor series will become so much more than just being about doctors. I've been going through some health things with my own kiddo, and so we get to interact with children at hospitals. A great part of this is to be able to also explain what other types of doctors do, so it'll go down the path of "What Does A Real Cardiologist Do?" So if that child is battling with something medically, we can add not just education for what's happening to them, but helping them see it as a career path in a way to gain something from their experiences.

So yeah, my hope is that it goes beyond veterinary medicine, and honestly goes beyond doctors in general, and that we can really start to expand this and work with other authors and their career path and what they do.

0:19:49.0 Katie Berlin: That's a big goal and totally awesome.

0:19:51.4 Cherice Roth: Thanks.

0:19:52.5 Katie Berlin: And you know, there's that vet tech's listening who are like, "Okay, when do we find out what a real veterinary technician looks like?"

0:20:00.5 Cherice Roth: Yeah, what's a real nurse. What's a real nurse. There are definitely these things that are all... I have this whole list of things I want to do to change the world, and I'm just like, look it's a list, I have to go down the boxes.

0:20:17.6 Katie Berlin: You've checked off more boxes than most people.

0:20:23.6 Cherice Roth: It's a process, it's a process. But I think that they're definitely... The veterinary nurses are such unsung heroes, I would not be sitting here, the level of doctor that I am without veterinary nurses, and I think that there's such work that we can do as veterinarians and people that work around them to help lift them up and support them so that it's super clear what they actually do. I totally agree.

0:20:46.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah, we'll just put it on the list.

0:20:48.3 Cherice Roth: Yeah, we'll mark it down. Change veterinary medicine is next, and then once we do that, I can go back and kind of re-up what's happening with veterinary nurses.

0:20:57.5 Katie Berlin: You've talked about some of the feedback you've gotten because of your books. Do you feel like that feedback has been pretty central to you continuing on, like to book three being created? Or are you kind of dead set on doing this regardless? Looks like you've gotten some really good feedback.

0:21:17.8 Cherice Roth: I have gotten good feedback, but I'll be really real. Book one and book

two were written about a week apart. It's how it happened, Katie. And then book three, I was like, "You know, oh yeah, I should probably do that too." But I think that for me, I was fully expecting for book two to be the one that hits home the most because it hit home for me. Even just... This is going to sound real silly, but even just seeing it and being able to hold it in my hand and seeing these two little brown girls at the end of the book, seeing themselves in white coats or in a jumper, honestly, it gave me all the feels.

0:22:02.3 Katie Berlin: I get goosebumps just thinking about it.

0:22:05.8 Cherice Roth: It's just the coolest thing. And, yes, the feedback has been phenomenal. The level of support, I've had several VMAs reach out to me and they purchased the books and dispersed them throughout their state in the elementary school systems, and STEM projects have reached out, and all of those sorts of things that I think are exactly where I see this book doing the most value.

Definitely, I would love to see... I know veterinary schools also have lots of roots in their communities that they serve, this would be another great thing, I know Texas A&M, for example, does their open house where they have the whole community come into the vet school, like what a great thing to be able to put in that child's hand to connect that experience with something that they can continue to experience from home. No pressure.

0:22:56.5 Katie Berlin: Right. Yeah, just my mind is whirling with workshop ideas, we could have children's books workshops. What do you want vet med to know? Write a book about it. What would that book look like?

0:23:09.8 Cherice Roth: Absolutely. The thing is I... I wrote two children's books. Literally, anybody can do this.

[laughter]

0:23:17.0 Katie Berlin: I mean, yes and no, right? It's like modern art, you have to know how to edit and distill down something really important into something that has very few words and very intentional imagery, and that is not easy, these are big messages for that format. So don't sell yourself short is all I'm saying.

0:23:40.3 Cherice Roth: Thank you, thank you.

0:23:42.3 Katie Berlin: But speaking of big messages, so I've worked in a couple of veterinary hospitals now where I would imagine that it's been easy for one or two team members to feel singled out because of skin color or orientation or any other factor that made them identify as a member of a marginalized group or a minority. And I feel like everybody in the practice, even if their intentions are great, and they want to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome, they're always looking to those individuals to tell them what to do and how to do it. And I think that must be very, very hard.

I have not been in that position, although in certain communities, I could have been, but I'm white passing enough that I wasn't put in that position. And I just wonder, how can team members, regardless of the role in the practice, work on fostering that kind of welcoming environment, an

inclusive environment without always having to put people on the spot in ways they may not want to be?

0:24:50.0 Cherice Roth: Yeah, yeah, so part of being able to educate people about diversity and inclusion is re-traumatizing. Any time you are singled out, treated differently, made to feel different, made to feel less than because of what you look like or your experiences, is traumatizing, and so to repeatedly ask those people to teach you how to have that mindset is re-traumatizing and so you're right, the responsibility should not fall on them all of the time. Certainly if they want to volunteer for it, then great, let's have the conversation and be open-hearted and open-minded.

Two great resources: one is the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association (MCVMA). When I found out that that group existed, I could not not be a part of it. I went through so many differing feelings of guilt, anger, depression around being a mom of color - my two boys can pass as white, and being thankful for that, and that they don't have to deal with a lot of the things that I had to deal with. There are a lot of feelings associated with that. So the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association, as far as I'm concerned, is the resource, and learning how to be around people of multi-cultures, how to talk about it, how to learn about it. We have a yearly conference. There are all sorts of ways to educate yourself, get on the website, volunteer, hang out with us, we're great.

The other is PrideVMC. I have just been... My heart is just so full every time I interact with the PrideVMC crew, they all are just amazing individuals. Again, much like the role of the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association, it is a haven for those that belong, but it is also a method of spreading the responsibility of teaching that different is okay, and different is required, that if we want veterinary medicine to continue and it will, to touch new parts of society and new populations of people, we have to get this right.

So those are two that come top of mind. I do also think that with that, there are other resources outside of it, books to read, all of those sorts of things, but as far as Veterinary Medicine is concerned, those are the two that pop into my mind as being highly impactful and highly accessible.

0:27:33.8 Katie Berlin: Thank you for sharing those because I follow both of those groups on social media, and I have to say like, I'll be scrolling through my feed or something and some beautiful uplifting posts will pop up on my Instagram feed, and inevitably it's from one of those groups, particularly PrideVMC - their social media is just sometimes just the most warm and wonderful place, and you just feel fortunate to have that light on you.

0:28:00.1 Cherice Roth: It's so true.

0:28:02.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah, they both seem like amazing groups of people, and I hope everyone listening, if you want to find out more about them, go check them out, we'll link to them in the show notes. And I appreciate you sharing that this is a tough topic, but you have done such a beautiful job of making it simple, like you said. It doesn't have to be so difficult to talk about these issues that really affect every single one of us, and in this profession, you're right, the only way to advance is going to be to embrace our differences and our diversity, and it makes me feel so good to see us doing that more and more, thanks to people like you.

0:28:41.6 Cherice Roth: We'll get there, we'll get there.

0:28:44.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah, we will. So Cherice, where can we find you on social media, on the web - where can people look you up?

0:28:51.7 Cherice Roth: Yeah, so I'm on LinkedIn, Instagram... rumor has it that there may or may not be TikTok videos in existence that have Dr. Roth on them, that's a thing. If you want to purchase the books with a signature, it's at The Real Doctor Store. If the signature doesn't matter, then Amazon, Barnes & Noble, pick up a copy, donate it to your local schools so that we can get the word out.

0:29:21.6 Katie Berlin: Absolutely we will. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Cherice Roth, it's been a pleasure, and hopefully we'll get to talk again, but in the meantime, thank you everyone for listening, and we'll catch you next time on Central Line.

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