

## **The Whistle August 1997**



Whistleblowers Australia Inc  
Box U129  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2500  
ph. 02 4221 3763

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### **Aunty denies 'sleeping with the enemy'**

**By Dr Tom Lonsdale**

The situation is grim and starts with the veterinary profession's inattention to detail. Whilst it is obvious to most folks, including the McLibel trial judge, that junk foods are bad for health the veterinary profession appears to have been too busy to notice. Once pointed out, the fact that an artificial diet fed monotonously either directly or indirectly poisons animals, the profession should have risen up and acted. Instead the professional ethic ruled that a mass cover up should apply. With the cover up safely in place profits were to be made. Increasingly elaborate ploys are now used in persuading the populace to a. keep more animals and b. feed them high priced artificial concoctions.

Whilst the veterinary profession may have been derelict in its duty the real power resides with the multi-national artificial pet food manufacturers. In Australia Nestle is a big player; the largest, with a 65 per cent share of the market, is the Uncle Bens company (makers of Pal, Whiskas, Chum etc.) a division of the Mars Corporation the family owned confectionery giant. An estimated 43 per cent of Australian households own a dog, compared with 23 per cent of dog loving British households. The annual Australian consumption of artificial pet food is in excess of \$700 million.

It would be hard to find an Australian over four years of age who would not know about the mass marketing of the products. Unfortunately the majority would not know that, according to legal advice, the advertising of these products is in likely breach of a number of statutes. A further consequence being that the problem lies not so much with the law as with its enforcement.

If the authorities fail to enforce the rules when there is blatant disregard for the truth in advertising rules, cruelty to animals legislation etc, then the chances look to be slim when dealing with covert, sly insinuation of ideas into the minds of the populace. Where covert promotions remain undetected the operators of the scam come to enjoy maximum benefit for minimum outlay. It's good business.

Enter the twin 'educational' programs, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) Pet PEP Program for primary schools and the ABC Radio National 'Science Show'. Both of these programs are influenced by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service (PIAS), the publicity front for Uncle Bens. Dr Jonica Newby is a front person for this front and has taken a leading role in the promotion of PetPEP throughout Australian primary schools. Primary

school teachers and school children would have little or no defence against this slick operation. Much the same applies to the highly educated listeners of the ABC Science Show.

Stuart Littlemore QC presenter of ABC Media Watch went to air with an [exposé](#) on 3 March 1997. He opened the segment with the following:

For instance Radio National's "Science Show", presided over by Robyn Williams, a man close to canonisation. He's just completed a presentation of a four part series on why people should keep dogs and cats. Oh! they didn't admit that was the subject, but it was. Written and narrated by a publicist for something called the 'Pet Care Information and Advisory Service' which, it seems fair to say, is nothing more than a front for the multi-national pet food manufacturer Mars, through its Australian subsidiary Uncle Bens.

Such a broadside, one might think, would be enough to scare ordinary mortals witless. We are not dealing with ordinary mortals but those who have grown accustomed to the exercise of considerable influence. Robyn Williams and Jonica Newby went on to produce a fifth, fifty minute program in the same vein and Dr Newby's book of the series is available in ABC shops.

Brian Johns the Managing Director and Donald Macdonald the Chairman of the Board have denied any wrong doing on the part of the ABC. They have both been fully informed of the activities and one must presume that they know and understand the rules. They have even been made aware that 'our ABC' has been using taxpayer funds to publish media releases accusing the whistleblowers in this case of making false and misleading statements. (Surely the ABC is supposed to research the story in the public interest not become the story.)

Dr Newby meanwhile has ensured that the wheel has turned full circle to where we came in with the establishment vets. She has lodged a complaint with the NSW Veterinary Surgeons Investigating Committee, made up of representatives from her faction of the AVA. The meaning is clear, taxpayer money was used for surreptitiously broadcasting pet food propaganda and the taxpayer will foot the bill for the prosecution of the whistleblower who drew attention to the scam. We should not overlook that the taxpayers continues to pay for the privilege of poisoning their pets and then visiting the vet for an expensive and temporary fix.

Fortunately there are some good guys. Other departments of the ABC have investigated and reported on the pet food industry exploitation. Despite the constraints of the commercial stations there have been several 'popular' segments devoted to the story. It seems a shame that the public has to depend on a handful of journalists who from time to time are prepared to risk the wrath of Dr Newby and the big budget advertisers.