



Mouth rot and dog breath

Nowadays periodontal disease fascinates me but I must admit that until I was twenty years of age I remained oblivious to the existence of the condition. My first introduction occurred during a lecture at the Royal Veterinary College, London. Robert Churchill-Frost, the lecturer, had an easy manner, a sense of irony and an ability to make things seem simple. And in the case of this student he certainly did impart a simple understanding. I don't believe that the words 'periodontal disease' were employed. As I recall, Churchill-Frost set the scene and described the origin, diagnosis and treatment in a single sentence. 'Once poodles reach about six years of age it is necessary to perform dental treatments, and thereafter every six months.' Even to me with my minimalist approach this seemed a brief description, but there was no pressure to enquire further.

The next learning experience that I recall took place five years later. By that time I had been a qualified vet for three years and had recently joined a London small animal practice. I have to admit that I was barely coping with the work — my previous jobs had been teaching in Kenya and treating cows in Wales — and I needed instruction. Malcolm Corner, the senior assistant in the practice, patiently coached me in the art and science of the small animal practitioner. 'That's periodontal disease,' he said as he pointed to the swollen gums overlaying the canine teeth of an old cat undergoing dental extraction. Subliminally I had become aware of the term 'periodontal disease' and I was pleased, as I thought, to learn how to label the condition.

On that occasion Malcolm was only partially right. The swollen gums of old cats are a rather dramatic aspect of periodontal disease