

FIRST ISSUE

THE VETERINARIAN

AUGUST 1993

\$A3.95 \$NZ5.50

Diet debate opens more than just can of worms

TO feed or not to feed processed pet food to companion animals: that is the question.

Whether 'tis wiser to feed a "complete and balanced" processed meal to satisfy the nutritional and dental health needs of a pet, or wiser to feed a natural diet of raw, meaty bones?

This question has had factions of the Australian veterinary profession and pet food industry at odds for more than 18 months and has recently been placed in the hands of the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association (ASAVA) to help find an answer.

The ASAVA was approached last month to nominate a person to carry out a literature review of the relationship between diet and disease in companion animals after an AVA executive decision.

just can of worms

An academic from the Sydney University was tipped to fill the position.

The nomination follows the AVA annual general meeting in June, where members voted in favour of an independent research committee being formed to report on the issue. Such research has been welcomed by most veterinarians and pet food manufacturers. The issue of diet and disease is nothing new in the veterinary profession – in fact many would say it has grown too long in the tooth – so why is it still so contentious?

Form versus content is the great dilemma in the veterinary profession.

MICHELLE GRAHAM reports:

Is it because of the unorthodox methods of the natural diet supporters or because it is something that, one way or another, could affect the future livelihood of all veterinarians?

If the alleged benefits of an all-natural diet are all that they are cracked up to be, surely pet owners will have less need for the services of a vet.

But then again, if owners fed their pets a diet of "teeth-breaking", "constipation-causing" bones, wouldn't there be an increased need for veterinary services?

And finally, what effect if any, is the debate having on the buying habits of the public. Research undertaken for *The Veterinarian* by Quadrant Research showed a majority of the 607 people

interviewed followed the moderate line and fed their companion animals

a mix of canned and fresh meat.

To understand the complexities of the argument it is necessary to look briefly at how and, most importantly, why it began.

The main debate about whether processed pet food was linked to disease in companion animals began in Australia in late 1991, when several outspoken veterinarians made claims that a diet of processed food led to periodontal disease in pets.

The most vocal of these veterinarians was Dr Tom Lonsdale, from Sydney's western suburb of Riverstone, who followed up these claims with the suggestion that the inclusion of raw meaty bones in a pet's diet could reduce the incidence of periodontal disease by about 85 per cent.

Dr Lonsdale later wrote several papers on dental hygiene and veterinary dentistry. He included case studies of patients from his clinic to support his hypotheses.

Pet food manufacturers and many veterinarians rejected Dr Lonsdale's claims on the basis they were unsubstantiated and ran counter the proven knowledge of leaders in the fields of pet nutrition and dentistry.

But despite the initial barrage of criticism, mainstream veterinary opinion in Australia is now starting to seriously look at the issue and what it can do about it.

This was reflected at the recent AVA meeting, at which it was agreed a committee be formed to investigate the link between diet and disease. The successful motion was proposed by Dr Douglas Bryden, director of Sydney University's Post Graduate Committee of Veterinary Science.

"When an issue of importance to the community and the profession is raised, I see it as my job to ensure the various points of view are examined," Dr Bryden said.

Compromise benefits teeth

WHILE not disagreeing with the suggestion that companion animals be fed bones, Australian Veterinary Dental Society president Dr Stephen Coles says it is too simplistic for raw bones to be a pet's sole diet.

"We (the AVDS) have said all along that dogs should be given bones. We don't disagree with that at all. In fact, nor does the pet food industry.

"What we do disagree with is that dog should be fed a diet of bones only," Dr Coles said.

He said the society had been promoting the feeding of bones to companion animals for about four years.

"We say they (pets) should be fed a complete, nutritionally sound diet, and bones should be given on top of that. I really can't see what all the fuss is about."

International veterinary dental expert Dr Colin Harvey, a guest speaker at a dentistry conference held at Sydney University in June, said he believed the case put forward for a natural diet of meaty bones supported by Dr Lonsdale was "legitimate".

"Dentistry has been overlooked generally in the past and because of the efforts of Dr Lonsdale it is now an area of some concern," Dr Harvey said.

"I believe there are enough reasons to express concern but there aren't enough to condemn current feeding practices."

Dr Harvey, the professor of surgery and dentistry at Pennsylvania University's School of Dental Medicine, said that while it was his role to challenge or support the asking of questions in veterinary dentistry, it was not his role to challenge the pet food industry.

"I am concerned he (Dr Lonsdale) is painting a picture in

a form that is larger than the specific issue. The concrete evidence just isn't there."

Claims that periodontal disease in companion animals had increased dramatically since the advent of processed pet food were denied by Dr Coles.

He said the incidence of periodontal disease in pets had risen only about 15 per cent in the past 90 years.

He said in 1899 it was found 70 per cent of dogs had periodontal disease. In 1993, United States studies showed the figure had increased to 85 per cent.

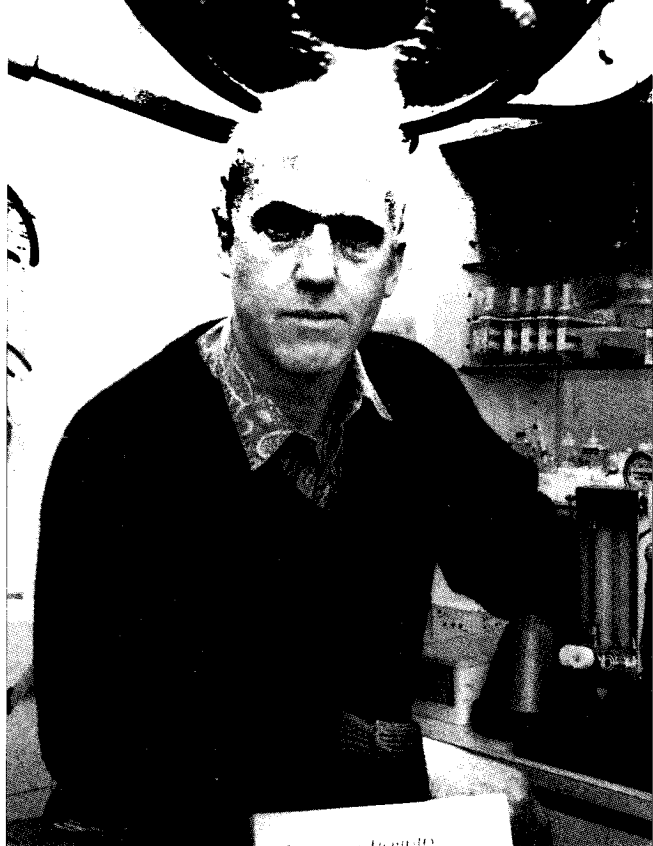
Dr Coles said the US figure could be misleading because the figure included gingivitis, which is not a bacteriological disease.

"So the figures are not as serious as people may think."

Dr Coles said he believed periodontal disease was more influenced by anatomy - specifically the size of an animal's jaw and nose - than diet.

The Australian Veterinary Dental Society is currently considering restarting a survey instigated by Dr Lonsdale which looked at diet and dental problems. The study asked veterinarians to examine their patients' mouths and inquire about the food the animal was fed.

"We thought it was a good idea, but unfortunately it got a poor response," Dr Coles said.



Meaty bones for pets only natural

ESTABLISHING a connection between diet and disease in companion animals started as a passing interest for all-natural diet supporter Dr Tom Lonsdale – now it is a consuming passion.

For the past six months, Dr Lonsdale has been writing about the toxic effects of periodontal disease in pets. A job which he has taken up full-time.

Dr Lonsdale said his passion for the issue was so intense because he believed it was the “greatest consumer fraud in the western world”.

“And vets are up to their necks in it,” he said.

“Despite the debate, thousands of vets are not only advising pet owners to feed their animals processed food, they are also profiting from its sale.

“They then further profit in the treatment that ensues,” he said.

Dr Lonsdale recommended that companion animals be fed a diet of raw meaty bones, something he said, nature intended.

“It is not me who determines the suitability of food for animals, it’s nature. I’m just drawing attention to a reality that everyone else is choosing to ignore.”

He suggested raw meaty bones, particularly chicken wings, should form the bulk of the diet for cats and dogs, and be supplemented with raw and cooked table scraps (except cooked bones).

Dr Lonsdale has gone “public” with the issue of diet and disease by appearing on *The Ray Martin Show* and *The Investigators*.

He said his fight against the “evils” of processed pet food would continue to the grave, or until the pet food manufacturers folded – whichever came first.

“I guess it has something to do with being in touch with my heartfelt obligations that prompts me to continue,” he said.

Dr Lonsdale said he believed processed pet food was the “sole reason we have the vet profession”.

“The profession has grown to depend on animals that are suffering immune compromise due to a septic mouth.

“And they all have a septic mouth because none of them can clean their teeth at the feeding session, as nature intended. It is meant to be a simultaneous thing.”

“They should be left to feed on the fresh food as is appropriate to their biological niche. It is all so incredibly simple.”

Pet food link to disease in animals a 'nonsense'

PET food manufacturers had never claimed processed food would take care of an animal's dental hygiene, Pet Food Manufacturers' Association of Australia president Dr Doug Hyslop has said.

"Feeding a dog a tin of pet food does not clean its teeth and we never said it would," he said.

"But, there are products on the market that we recommend be fed to cats and dogs which help with the cleaning of the teeth, and more importantly, the massage of the gums."

Dr Hyslop argued strongly against claims that processed pet food was somehow linked to periodontal disease and other diseases of companion animals.

"That is a lot of nonsense. It's not based on fact or science," Dr Hyslop said.

"We support anything that has a scientific basis."

These sentiments were echoed by Uncle Ben's veterinary services manager Dr Greg Mahon who said his company's products were proven to be safe through the guidelines set down by the American Association of Control Officials (a branch of the National Academy of Science).

"They have a definition for what they consider a complete and balanced diet – that is,

something that maintains the health of an animal for a given life stage for the entire length of its life.

"Which means you don't have to supply any other nutrient except water," he said.

He said Uncle Ben's were comfortable with the fact that they had done all the work necessary to show their diet was safe and could be fed long-term to an animal without it developing nutritional deficiencies "or any of the problems associated with feeding bones".

"There are already anecdotal reports coming in from clients who have taken Dr Lonsdale's advice (of feeding raw bones) and are now seeing problems with constipation or bowel obstructions," Dr Mahon said.

"I guess where Dr Lonsdale and ourselves diverge is that he would recommend feeding raw chicken wings for 90 per cent of the diet of cats and 60 per cent of the diet of dogs – without any scientific evidence to back up his recommendation as adequate for the dietary needs of a dog or cat."

In the United States and United Kingdom, the veterinary profession recommended against the feeding of bones because of the dangers associated with it. Constipation and cracks to bones and teeth were some of the reasons.

On the topic of whether processed food caused periodontal disease, Dr Mahon said the issue should be broken into two areas – the nutritional requirements of the animal and dental hygiene.

"It's wrong to put the two together in a single argument. There is an enormous amount of scientific data to show that periodontal problems are caused by bacteria from the animal's mouth."

"Periodontal disease and the accumulation of plaque will occur regardless of the type of the diet the animal is on because it is caused by bacteria, not by food."

He said certain foods, however, had textures that caused an abrasive action that cleaned teeth, and consequently removed the plaque.

"If you want to make some generalisations about the accumulation of plaque, then you could say it increases with the age of the animal and there is a correlation between the weight of the animal and the amount of plaque which accumulates in its mouth. Small dogs accumulate a lot more plaque than big dogs."

"I guess that is further complicated by the fact that dogs these days tend to live a lot longer and a lot of the smaller dogs tend not to be fed diets that require a lot of chewing," Dr Mahon said.