

ABC The Investigators

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Edited transcript

Inga Johansen

During the twenty thousand odd years that dogs have been our companions we've bred them to whatever shape and size took our fancy even if that shape was impractical or downright unhealthy.

Cats on the other hand have largely retained the shape natural selection gave them.

But when it comes to eating both our carnivorous companions are more used to answering a tap on the tin than dining the way their wild cousins always have — on raw meat off the bone with a little of the hide on the side.

Sydney vet, Tom Lonsdale, believes it's through that very change of diet that today's pet lovers are condemning their carnivorous companions to a life of ill health and misery.

Tom Lonsdale

Opening the mouth, that often gives us a clue to the overall state of health of the patient and straight away we can say that it's real bad.

Look at this canine tooth here that's being rejected by the body, and you can see that just touching it, it will wobble, it hurts the little dog so we won't do too much of that whilst she's still conscious.

(Beeping sound of the anaesthetic machine) This one here, it's got what we call furcation, we can stick the probe between the roots of that tooth there, and look how it just wants to wobble about in the gum.

Inga Johansen

Research tells us that up to 85% of pets have periodontal disease by the time they're three years old. Periodontal disease attacks the gums which can become so infected they reject the teeth.

Our vets are just waking up to problems of periodontal disease in our domesticated carnivores and most agree on what sort of treatment they're going to need. But when it comes to its prevention there's heated argument throughout the veterinary world.

Tom Lonsdale blames mouths like this on the exclusive feeding of commercial pet food both canned and dried. He recommends raw meaty bones and table scraps instead of commercial foods for all cats and dogs whose breeding and health allow it.

Tom Lonsdale

Raw bones are admirably suited to the requirements of the carnivore.

Inga Johansen

So it must be raw and it must not be cooked.

Tom Lonsdale

That's right.

Kathy McQuillan

I'm very concerned, I think the line that Dr Lonsdale is peddling is a real oversimplification of the issues and I'm terribly afraid that it will have very detrimental effects on the overall health of our animals because I'd hate to see us throw the baby out with the bathwater so to speak and neglect a complete and balanced diet for dental hygiene.

Inga Johansen

Not surprisingly Kathy McQuillan, veterinary advisor to Uncle Ben's, the largest pet food producer in Australia, doesn't see eye to eye with Tom Lonsdale.

With brands such as Pal and Whiskas, Uncle Ben's supplies a diet which it says provides for all your pet's nutritional requirements.

Kathy McQuillan agrees the addition of meaty bones to the diet could help many animals but, she says ...

Kathy McQuillan

For us to try and come in as a ... giving a blanket recommendation on a veterinary line I think is quite unacceptable, as a veterinarian myself.

Inga Johansen

Why not say on the packet, at least check with your vet as to the feeding of raw bones in conjunction with this food.

Kathy McQuillan

If we put all our recommendations of what we think is good health care on our can, we'd need a jolly big label.

Tom Lonsdale

The advertising of these products should be banned; in much the same way that the World Health Organisation determined that the only way to control the unrestricted sale of baby milk formula was to effectively ban the advertising and the promotion of these products.

Inga Johansen

The idea of feeding raw bones for healthy teeth and gums is not new and a number of studies support this theory. But just suggesting giving your pet a bone flies in the face of conventional wisdom in both the United States and Britain where owners are positively discouraged from doing so. The fear is that they'll break the teeth, get stuck in the throat, or even cause blockages throughout the digestive system.

Here in Australia, Stephen Coles, president of the Australian Veterinary Dental Society, freely admits that he's gradually being converted to the raw bone theory. But he rejects Tom Lonsdale's call to cut out commercial foods altogether.

Stephen Coles

Most dogs, now, are on more convenience foods and we have to accept that. The best thing to do would be to go and give your dog probably an ox tail with the hide still on it once a week — but that's just socially not acceptable.

Inga Johansen

There's no social stigma at Sydney's Taronga Zoo with the addition of vitamins and minerals the big cats eat sides of beef, whole chickens, rats and the like and thrive on them.

Taronga Zoo Vet

We haven't seen any signs of periodontal disease in any of our big cats or canids and some of these cats can be up to twenty years of age.

Inga Johansen

However few pet owners we spoke to had any idea that raw bones might be good and safe for their animals to eat.

Pet owner 1

I thought it may have choked or whatever, that's why I haven't done it I don't think.

Inga Johansen

Do you ever feed you cats bones?

Pet owner 2

No, never.

Inga Johansen

While bones were definitely out of fashion, tooth brushes were in.

Pet owner 3

We brush his teeth.

Inga Johansen

You brush your pet's teeth? What with?

Pet owner 3

Our vet suggested that we buy some sort of toothpaste and with stocking; my husband just brushes his teeth.

Inga Johansen

Sadly, this is true for some animals, especially those whose shapes have been engineered by man and not nature.

And if you want to check to see whether your animal's gums and teeth are nice and healthy there is one quick way, just umm ... have a good sniff of their breath. Bad breath means not a very healthy mouth ... she smells beautiful.