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Sefi's Ear Discharge

Than and Nichola Wright, owners of Sefi the 6-year-old cat, have done us a great service. They are to be congratulated on their stoicism and forbearance in the face of counterfeit science and techno veterinary medicine.

In the June 2007 Post Graduate Foundation (PGF) *Control & Therapy* 4803 they recount the sorry tale of how a discharge from Sefi's ear led them through an obstacle course of first opinions, expert opinions, bacteriological tests, radiographic tests, test therapies and radical surgery.¹ After several months, and I care not to think how many dollars, the Wrights say:

We were highly concerned and frustrated at the lack of progress we had made and the costs outlaid which had provided no answers as to why she had the condition or what was causing it. As a last resort, our vet told us about Dr Richard Malik at the PGF.

Dr Malik recommended that the owners discontinue feeding the prescription dry cat 'food' and provide a more natural diet which straightaway had the desired effect: 'After changing her diet, it didn't take long for us to see a rapid improvement in the condition of her ear and the happiness of our cat.'

In conclusion the Wrights state:

We have learnt that while our vet went through appropriate routine testing to find the cause of Sefi's ear problems, there isn't always an obvious diagnosis and factors such as diet and environment should be investigated in the first instance.

Let's face it, we all make mistakes from which we can hope to learn. The discharge from Sefi's ear contains lessons old and new.

At the 1993 Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) Annual General Meeting the members approved the then PGF Director, Dr Douglas Bryden's motion:

That in keeping with the AVA policy of providing forums for the membership, the AVA establish an independent committee to prepare a report on the interaction between diet and disease in companion animals.²

In the event the AVA restricted the terms of reference to an investigation of existing literature on the diet and periodontal disease nexus. The committee was ‘assisted’ by a pet-food company employee. Notwithstanding, in February 1994 *AVA News* carried the front page article:

Diet and disease link — final report

In summary the committee found, ‘there is sufficient evidence to incriminate an association between diets of predominantly soft consistency and periodontal disease’ and that veterinarians ‘need to be concerned about the relationship between diet and health’.

The reasons for restricting the terms of reference as compared to the very broad specification in the motion were as follows:

- The committee believed the concerns raised required urgent attention and comment. It was considered that within the time frame set by the AVA it was not possible to explore every aspect of dietary interaction with disease.
- Information which could be gathered on the broader issues would be unlikely to add more than is already well known.
- Concentration should be placed on periodontal disease and diet because this was the principal area of current concern to the Australian veterinary profession.
- It was felt that if periodontal disease could be prevented then any secondary complications from this problem would be reduced.

There is prima facie evidence to justify concern by veterinarians. Pet owners should consider the need to provide some ‘chewy’ material as well as the basic nutrient intake of their dog or cat.

Periodontal disease may be associated with the occurrence of other diseases but the available evidence is inconclusive. Periodontal disease is arguably the most common disease condition seen in small animal practice and its effects on the gums and teeth can significantly affect the health and well being of affected animals. This is sufficient in itself to give reason for concern. Proof of additional systemic effects is not necessary to justify further action.

Further research is required to better define the relationship between particular diet types and oral health in dogs and cats. Those investigating small animal health problems should also take diet and diet consistency into account when researching systemic diseases — possible confounding effects of diet and poor oral health must be considered in such studies.³

Clearly the AVA Diet and Disease Committee, in 1994, established an ethical and professional benchmark applicable to Australian researchers and clinicians who investigate and treat diseases of companion animals.

Previously in the June 1993 Post Graduate Committee *Veterinary Dentistry* Proceedings 212 a NSW lawyer's opinion was published indicating that processed pet-food related matters may become issues of relevance in the future:

1. Potential claims by pet owners under various pieces of consumer legislation throughout the States and Territories of Australia.
2. In the Federal sphere potential Trade Practices Act claims for false or misleading claims may be made either in relation to advertising or promotional material or labels.
3. The new Truth in Labelling activities instituted by the Federal Government.
4. Potential problems or claims under the recently introduced Product Liability provisions in Part V of the Trade Practices Act.
5. The, as yet, unknown effect of class actions which have been lawful in Australia since the 5th day of March 1992 which may tend to overcome the existing drawbacks to actions brought by individual pet owners, namely the high cost of litigation and claims which may amount to only several hundreds of dollars in relation to an individual pet.

The foregoing relates to potential claims against manufacturers, distributors and possibly even retailers of processed pet food. Query what may be the legal problems of veterinarians who fail to consider the issues in this paper or fail to address those issues in advising pet owners who make known to the veterinarian that they rely wholly and solely on processed pet food to supply their pets' diet. Is it too much to suggest that, as pet owners, in common with everyone else in the community become more litigious, veterinarians may some day share top billing on a Writ?[4](#)

In our commitment to learn from history, honour Sefi the cat and help secure our future, it seems to me, now is the time to raise awareness of the legal provisions in all Australian States and Territories. Perhaps the Board of the Post Graduate Foundation could give priority to obtaining fresh legal advice, for publication in *Control & Therapy*, on the diverse implications of the pet diet and disease issue as may apply to veterinary clinicians, researchers and educators.

Notes

1. Wright, T and Wright, N (2007) [Waxy Ear Canal in a Cat](#), *Control & Therapy* No 4803, Post Graduate Foundation in Veterinary Science, University of Sydney
2. Lonsdale, T (2001) Disturbing the peace, in *Raw Meaty Bones: Promote Health*, Rivetco P/L, NSW, Australia, p 26
3. *Australian Veterinary Association News* (1994) Diet and disease link — final report, February, pp 1 and 6
4. Lonsdale, T (1993) [Preventative Dentistry](#), in *Veterinary Dentistry*, Proceedings of the Post Graduate Committee in Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Sydney, 212, 235–244