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PET DIET AND WIDESPREAD DISEASE

Since December, 1991 indignant private practitioner veterinarians have slammed the hypocrisy of a 'healing profession' being in collusion with the multinational pet food monopolists. It was alleged that widespread disease of pet animals was accompanied by serious national economic and environmental consequences. Parallels were drawn with the exploitation of third world communities by baby milk formula companies in league with local health care professionals.

Despite the depths of concern the leaders of the profession failed to act until March, 1993 when the first and only public response was to ban member discussions in the Australian Veterinary Association Newsletter. *'AVA News believes that this issue has been aired fully over the last year and does not intend to run further correspondence. - Ed.'* The same issue carried extensive coverage of pet food company matters.

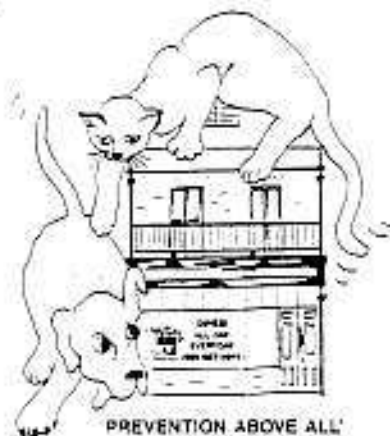
Lacking action and denied a voice some members took the matter to the floor of the Association AGM. Despite the AVA Executive and pet food industry opposition the ban was lifted and a committee established to investigate the links between diet and disease. Now it is official, the committee says: *'Periodontal 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.'*

This begs the question when, and in what form, will action be taken.

Action may be slow in coming. The AVA has just signed a three-year sponsorship deal with three major pet food companies. The AVA marketing manager is an ex-employee of 'one of Australia's largest pet food manufacturers'. (AVA News, March 1993) *'Part of the marketing manager's salary and project costs are paid for by the major sponsors. Other contributions to her salary and activities have been made by the Pet Food Manufacturers Association of Australia, Petcare Information and Advisory Service and the AVA's communication fund. The marketing manager retains no links, formal or otherwise apart from friendships, with her previous employers.'*

Letter from Chief Executive Officer, AVA, 11 May, 1993.

Dr Pam Scanlon, Animal Welfare Officer and President Elect of the AVA circulated a letter to all members on 3 February, 1994. She seems to imply no animal welfare or integrity problems with past and existing sponsorship arrangements. *'To develop stronger links with other allied organisations, particularly those with which we share a common interest. These links should be of mutual benefit to the participants, directly or indirectly. The major sponsor group is but one example of a relationship which has allowed the AVA to expand its influence into the commercial sphere as we benefited from the external funding of such things as the members' survey, the client expectation survey, enlarged annual conferences, undergraduate courses, marketing activities and more. This has been and must continue to be achieved with our integrity intact'*



DIET AND DISEASE LINK— FINAL REPORT

After nearly four months of work and at a cost to the AVA of \$7000, the committee set up to explore the possible link between diet and disease has presented its final report to Executive.

The exploration involved an extensive literature search by the committee which comprised of paid consultant, Associate Professor David Watson, epidemiologist Dr Peter Groves and Doug Bryden, Director of the Sydney University Post Graduate Committee in Veterinary Science.

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".

However the committee said "further studies are needed to elucidate the rela-

tionship between diet and periodontal disease".

COMMISSIONED

The AVA commissioned the literature search after a motion was passed at the Annual General Meeting in May, 1993 which called for the association "to appoint an independent committee to prepare a report on the connection between diet and disease in companion animals."

The motion was the culmination of more than a year of debate through the Letters to the Editor pages of the AVA News.

The terms of reference decided upon by this committee and accepted by the Executive of the AVA was:

"To explore the relationship between diet and oral health in dogs and cats and

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"Diet" from page one

the possibility that poor oral health may contribute to other disease conditions in these species."

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.

Changes in feeding methods for dogs and cats over recent decades have arguably improved many aspects of pet health, especially by reducing or preventing diseases associated with nutritional deficiencies and excesses.

However, periodontal disease remains a common and serious diet related problem in pet dogs and cats. It is not

known whether periodontal disease is becoming more common.

There is reasonable evidence that soft diets are associated with increased prevalence and severity of periodontal disease. The indications are that softer foods are inefficient in abrading plaque from the teeth, and that harder foods requiring prehension and mastication are preferable for dogs and cats, all other things being equal. There is no guarantee that hard foods will prevent periodontal disease in an individual pet, but on balance they should help.

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ A suitable ration for dogs and cats should be nutritionally adequate and have physical qualities (texture, abrasiveness, chewiness) that will help control plaque and maintain oral health.
- ❖ Diets consisting largely of soft foods, even if nutritionally complete, may be physically inadequate and favour development of periodontal disease.
- ❖ Soft foods of home-prepared or commercial original may not differ in this regard.
- ❖ When soft foods form the basis of a pet's ration, additional methods are advisable to remove plaque.
- ❖ Dry foods made by pet food companies are, on balance, likely to be more effective than soft foods in removing plaque. However they are far from ideal in this regard at present and are likely to perform variably depending on the size, shape and consistency of individual pieces. Until data becomes available on the optimum characteristics for these products, veterinarians should make their own assessments from the animals they see.
- ❖ Raw meaty bones have good physical characteristics to promote oral health, but they do not provide complete and balanced nutrition by themselves. Other food items are needed to provide essential nutrients. □

AUSTRALIAN SMALL ANIMAL VETERINARY ASSOCIATION



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16th August, 1993

Dr. T. Lonsdale,
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Dear Dr. Lonsdale,

Thank you for your letter of August 10th. In answer to your query my affiliation with the pet food industry commenced on July 1st, 1993, when I became a part time consultant to Friskies Petcare. I am also a consultant to Diagnostic Veterinary Laboratories, an honorary pharmacologist for the Biochemistry Department of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, am on the editorial advisory board of The Veterinarian and am a member of the Australian Jockey Club Scientific Review Panel. My affiliation with Friskies obviously precludes me from participating in the AVA's independent committee, but certainly does not preclude me from viewing the issues critically and rationally.

I recommend good quality commercial petfood to my clients and feed my own animals commercial petfood. As I care very deeply about my own pets and their welfare is of the greatest importance to me, I hope you will respect that my motives for recommending commercial products do not have a hidden and scurrilous agenda.

The AVA and ASAVA are aware of my affiliation as I have had no reason to hide it. If I did not believe that good quality commercial petfood had advanced the health of companion animals enormously in the past decades I would not have accepted this consultancy.

You should also be aware that I voted for the amended motion that the AVA set up an independent committee to look at the relationship between diet and disease, so I can hardly be accused of refusing to "champion the investigations into the processed pet foods/disease nexus". I also have spent considerable time and effort ensuring that the person recommended by the ASAVA to conduct a literature review of the subject (as requested by AVA) is appropriately qualified to conduct an unbiased study and who is independent of any affiliated interest. Again, I hardly think this is the action of someone not interested in supporting the investigation.

I would be most happy for you to copy this correspondence to the appropriate bodies, whoever they may be.

Yours sincerely,

Jill Maddison,
President, ASAVA

(Dictated by Dr. Maddison & signed in her absence)