

AIDS-like disease threatens family pets



Open wide . . . Dr Lonsdale checks the mouth and gums of a pet patient, Jes, at his Sydney surgery. — Picture: ALAN PRYKE

By science and technology writer JULIAN CRIBB

INAPPROPRIATE diets may be behind the epidemic of an AIDS-like disease among domestic cats and dogs, according to a study published in an international veterinary journal.

Research by a Sydney vet, Dr Tom Lonsdale, has found a dramatic improvement in the immune status of pet carnivores after moving them on to a more natural diet.

Most pet dogs and cats suffer from an acute mouth disease for most of their lives, which undermines the immune system leading to a sharp drop in the number of white blood cells, Dr Lonsdale said in a scientific study in the *British Journal of Small Animal Practice*.

"Previously we thought animals were suffering the effects of old age — when in fact they were wasting away with periodontal disease and diet-induced AIDS," he said.

Dr Lonsdale said he had likened the pet condition to AIDS because its effect was similar — a drop in white blood cells in the immune system — and it was acquired through feeding artificial diets. It was not due to a virus like HIV.

"All animals suffer from some form of gum disease, but carnivores suffer

particularly badly, because their natural act of chewing raw meaty bones cleanses the teeth and gums," he told *The Weekend Australian*.

"When you put them on soft diets they suffer from an acute inflammatory process from teething onwards, which continues for all their life."

About 85-100 per cent of domestic pets suffered from gum disease, which is why their breath often smelt foul.

Dr Lonsdale said the immune damage was caused by a combination of three factors — toxins from more than 300 kinds of bacteria infesting the animal's mouth and gums, an over-reaction by the immune system itself, which also attacked the mouth and gums, and the effects of a largely plant-based diet in processed foods on the carnivore's gut.

"Minutes after eating, the bacteria simply swarm through the mouth, consuming food fragments which the animal cannot get rid of. When they run out of food, they start to attack the cells of the gums and mouth," he said.

Dr Lonsdale said for cats and small dogs, pieces of whole chicken, whole fish and meaty lamb or rabbit bones, along with table scraps, made ideal meals.