

Letters and perspectives:

The veterinary profession's disgrace

In December 1991, a letter from me was published in the *AVJ* expressing my dismay at the positive correlation between the feeding of processed pet foods to dogs and cats and periodontal disease.

Since then there has been little change in that situation – in fact it is a thousand times worse.

I now find out that at least four vet schools receive significant funding of one sort or another from major pet food manufacturers. Veterinary faculties at Melbourne, Murdoch, Queensland and Sydney all receive financial ‘assistance’ from one of these companies.

The situation at Murdoch seems dire – there a scheme called the Multi Project Funding Program is envisaged – with one company funding the whole thing.

I understand that at least in one case a lecturer in nutrition is a company employee.

Other major companies are involved in this corporatisation of veterinary schools and undergraduates across Australia and no doubt across at least the Western world. The Waltham Research Institute for Small Animal Nutrition in the UK for example is owned and run by the Mars Corporation.

Figures quoted years ago by Waltham indicated that up to 85% of dogs and cats aged at least 3 years suffered from periodontal disease that would benefit from treatment – what they didn't say is that the prime cause of that situation was soft foods; namely, processed artificial concoctions marketed as pet foods.

And now we have the situation where they have infiltrated vet schools to ‘educate’ aspiring young minds that this is the way to go – IT IS NOT!

In spite of some people saying things have improved from the days of home prepared meals (yes, they may have been at fault), I believe that the incidence of periodontal disease and its associated illnesses is just as bad, if not worse, now than 20-odd years ago.

Dogs and cats are carnivores; carnivores eat herbivores – herbivores are approximately 55% muscle and bone plus offal and that is what is meant to be fed to our pets, NOT grain-based canned or dry ‘junk’ food scientifically formulated with added preservatives, colourings, flavourings, vitamins etc. for every life stage and disease you can think of.

We now have 100s of ‘educated’ young vets advocating the wholesale feeding of processed foods to our pets as best – I don't hear the medical profession advocating McDonalds or KFC.

What is the AVA doing about it? Nothing! I think that it is disgraceful for a profession that was once an honourable one.

Breck Muir
NSW

This article appeared in the January/February 2016 issue of the Australian Veterinary Journal

Reply from Robert Johnson, President Australian Veterinary Association

The issue of periodontal disease and diet has been debated for many years. There is a variety of opinions from a variety of sources. Space does not permit an exhaustive analysis of the current state of the debate. Instead I will respond to the major points brought up in the letter.

Although Dr Muir argues that nothing has changed since 1991, I would argue that the range and quality of premium foods has increased markedly. In addition, the field of veterinary dentistry has advanced significantly and awareness of diseases such as periodontal disease has also increased.

The relationship between veterinary schools and the major pet food manufacturers is largely a matter for those two parties. Representatives from pet food companies or from any commercial entity should declare any conflicts of interest before making a presentation, be that as an invited speaker at a veterinary school, conference or meeting. Universities are also integrating the study of veterinary ethics within their curricula, as well as critical evaluation of scientific evidence and evidence-based medicine.

Veterinarians, veterinary students and hospital staff need to understand the products and foods that are available and the companies have a responsibility to act ethically when disseminating that information. Companies may also use sponsorship or a trade show to communicate with veterinarians.

In these cases, the source, bias or intent of the information is clear. Critical evaluation of evidence includes ‘promotional literacy’ – the ability to discern scientific from promotional material.

Sponsorship of continuing educational events is vital in maintaining a high standard of information delivery to the profession. Withdrawal of industry involvement in scientific studies or veterinary education does not necessarily solve Dr Muir’s perceived dilemma.

In reference to Dr Muir's last point, "What is the AVA doing about it?", the AVA represents a wide variety of disciplines, special interest groups, divisions and branches with a broad range of opinions on diverse subjects and issues. There will always be debate on how best to feed your dog or cat. Reaching consensus is not easy and at times we must acknowledge our differences or just agree to disagree. However, at all times it is imperative that we respect the opinion of others and play the issue, not the person.

The AVA Code of Conduct is currently under review. I also refer Dr Muir to the Policy Compendium, specifically 6.21 Nutrition guidelines for dogs and cats, which states:

The nutritional status of cats and dogs is a very important indicator of their health and welfare and should be assessed by veterinarians as part of a holistic approach to veterinary care.

The AVA also provides a range of media for debating issues such as small animal nutrition, including forums (both face to face and online), eLine and the AVJ.

On a personal note as a veterinarian who has been in practice for quite some time, I see far fewer cases of nutritional disorders in puppies and kittens than I used to see. Forty years ago nutritional hypertrophic osteodystrophy in dogs and rickets in cats was quite common. If a client's cat had renal disease we had to prescribe a homemade recipe that was not nearly as well balanced or as palatable as what is available today. Canned dog food was made from the scraps from the abattoir floor and you fed sheep's hearts and liver to your pet cat; hardly a balanced diet. And I cannot remember the last time I had to perform a perineal urethrostomy on a persistently blocked cat, thanks to the wide range of available prescription diets and ongoing research into feline urinary conditions, largely funded by major pet food companies.

The pet food industry and the veterinary profession should continue to focus on the common goal of improving the health and welfare of companion animals through collaboration in practice, education and research, ensuring that at all times that high ethical standards are upheld.

Robert Johnson
President, Australian Veterinary Association

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