

Pet vet bills give paws for thought

Dr Richard Malik, who lectures at Sydney University, also runs his own practice in Double Bay.

Dr Malik is most scornful of pet food companies, which he accuses of "hijacking academia". It's a controversial call given the small animal hospital at Sydney University, where he works, is sponsored by Hills pet food. The Valentine Charlton Cat Clinic at the university has a Hills-branded waiting room and the company donates free food to the hospital.

"Hills gives us all the food we need and the first exposure of vet students to what they should be feeding animals is what they see at university. At the University of Melbourne they have a lecturer that is supported by

“ You take on a pet knowing there will be costs

Hills and they have convinced vets that they can make 35 per cent of their profits by selling dried premier cat and dog food out the front," he says.

According to the IBISWorld report, pet food is the biggest proportion of pet spending, making up half of the \$5 billion spent on products and services. But Dr Malik believes the current commercial diet most cats and dogs are on is akin to feeding your kids fast food every night.

Many of the diseases he treats he blames on diet. Cats and dogs are carnivores and are not designed to eat the carbohydrates contained in dried food, he says.

"The great enemy of cats is dried cat food, it has way too much carbohydrate and now we see cats with diabetes and periodontal diseases, a whole range of conditions due to being too fat," he says.

As a cat owner, he feeds his moggies lamb shanks and chicken frames and the odd canned premium food.

Dr Malik respects the pet food industry for doing extensive research into animal nutrition and health, but he thinks it presents potential problems. He doesn't want young vets to get "indoctrinated" to recommend commercial pet food.

"The vast majority of nutritional studies in cats are conducted by or funded by corporations... Although these studies are often of the highest standard, and conducted by independent researchers of the first order, concern must arise as to bias entering the scientific literature when manufacturers are involved in establishing research agendas.

"In my opinion, the information they present is often commercially driven but cloaked as scientific dogma," Dr Malik wrote in the journal *The Veterinarian* in 2007.

The deep freezer out the back of Dr Tom Lonsdale's Veterinary clinic in Windsor is a scary sight. Inside are sheep and goats heads, rabbits, rats, guts, livers, lambs hearts, you name it. For \$2 a kilo, pet owners and patients stock up on the raw diet he believes nature intended our pets to have. Back in the '90s, Dr Lonsdale noticed many of his patients had stinking breath and rotten teeth.

He blamed the commercial diet of pets and wrote the book "Raw Meaty Bones", which details the health benefits of returning dogs and cats to a carnivore diet.

"Dogs and cats are designed to chew and they have been turned into little (junk food) addicts... by eating stuff that is not good for them," he says.

Hayley Williams took her boxer to Dr Lonsdale. Up to the age of four Titan was fed a diet of standard canned and dried commercial dog food and got to a fat 32kg, became lethargic, had bad breath, flatulence and doggy dandruff. Titan boarded with Lonsdale for five weeks.

"He's lost six kilos, his coat is shiny and glossy, he has lost the dandruff and has so much more energy, and no doggy breath," Williams says.

Dr Lonsdale's views have attracted criticism and censure from the Australian Veterinary Association.

NSW Labor MP Paul Lynch responded to the AVA's criticisms in Parliament on May 13, 2004: "The AVA has financial ties to pet food companies. For 10 years the AVA has sought to stifle news of the scandal... The whistleblower was punished. It is a disgrace."

Dr Neck from ASAVA disagrees there is a link between diet and illness. "In my years as a clinical vet, I have not seen any diets that cause disease," he says.

Duncan Hall from the Pet Food Industry Association which represents the big players like Mars, Nestle Purina and Hills said commercial food was good for pets.

"Very capable companies have invested effort and research to make sure these foods are nutritionally complete with all the required vitamins and minerals," he says.



Haley Williams and Titan. She had to consult a veterinarian who recommended putting him on a diet

Picture: Angelo Soulas