

# JUNK PET FOOD AND THE DAMAGE DONE

*Dogs, cats and ferrets fed a regular diet of processed food suffer from a range of cruel and debilitating diseases.*

*Pet owners can improve their pets' health by feeding them a natural, chewy diet primarily of whole raw carcasses or at least raw meaty bones.*

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Imagine if all the Big Macs, Happy Meals and Coca-Colas consumed by Morgan Spurlock during his month-long binge for the film documentary *Super Size Me*<sup>1</sup> were instead tipped into a vat, ground to a pulp and cooked under pressure. Let us imagine that half the resultant glop was sealed in cans and the other half dehydrated, extruded into kibble and packed in bags—with brightly coloured labels asserting the health benefits.

Suppose, then, that Spurlock either slurped through the contents of the McCans or crunched his way through the McKibble. And now—this is an important aspect—imagine that Spurlock had neither a toothbrush nor the ability to ask for one, so consequently didn't clean his teeth for the month-long experiment. Now I ask: what would Spurlock's physical, dental and mental health be like after such a crazy experiment? Would doctors, dentists and health regulators provide official endorsement for the canned and kibbled diet? Indeed, would it be likely that Spurlock picked up his McCans and McKibble at his local medical or dental practice?

For the vast majority of pet dogs (modified wolves), cats (modified desert predators) and ferrets (modified polecats), a diet of McCans or McKibble is their everyday reality. Spurlock's doctor told him he had to stop his unnatural experiment inside 30 days because he was killing himself. By contrast, the world's pet doctors (vets) encourage pet owners to feed McCans and McKibble *every day* of their pets' lives. I know; I was one such vet.

## Poisoned five ways

For the first 15 years of my working life as a graduate of the Royal Veterinary College, University of London, I went along with conventional veterinary wisdom. I counselled my clients against the feeding of home-prepared meals because they were unlikely to get the "balance" of nutrients right, I suggested. Raw meat posed a risk due to bacteria and lack of calcium, so I said. As for bones, everyone knew that bones posed a hazard for breaking teeth and causing obstruction. And whoever heard of feeding bones to cats? The manufacturers have removed the guesswork, I assured my clients. "Giant companies understand the science and have the resources to ensure the best possible fare for your pet. It's convenient, too!"

With the matter of diet for my patients glossed over, I could return to the more pressing problems associated with diagnosis and treatment. After all, that's what I was trained to do and that's what my clients expected of me—and the stream of sick pets with skin disease, heart, liver, bowel and dental disease, cancer and other maladies was never ending.

Oh, how I cringe! How culpably, horribly wrong I had been! As varied as my patients were in size, species, age, sex and breed, the one common uniting feature was their junk food diet. They were all fed McCans and McKibble, and almost without exception this was the reason why the animals needed my services. Yes, it's as simple and dramatic as that, and for the following reasons:

1. Canned soft foods and grain-based kibble do not clean teeth. In fact, food sludge sticks to teeth and feeds the bacteria in dental plaque. The body's second line of defence, the immune system, mobilises against the bacterial invaders. The result: inflamed gums, bad breath, circulating bacteria and bacterial poisons that affect the rest of the body.<sup>2,3</sup>

2. Dogs, cats and ferrets don't have the digestive enzymes in the right quality or quantity to deal with the nutrients in grains and other plant material, whether those nutrients are raw or cooked. When grains are cooked at high temperatures at the pet food

factory, the starches, proteins and fats become denatured or toxic to varying degrees.<sup>4</sup> Junk food is laden with colorants, preservatives, humectants and a raft of other strange chemical additives—none with any nutritive value and all toxic to varying degrees.<sup>5</sup> Once in the bowel of a carnivore, toxic nutrients are absorbed into the circulation and affect various body systems.

3. Poorly digested grain-based junk food supports a large population of toxin-producing bacteria in the lower bowel. The bowel lining, in constant contact with poisons, may be adversely affected. Some poisons pass through the bowel wall into the blood circulation, are carried to other organs and create further problems.<sup>6</sup>

4. Like Morgan Spurlock, some pets show signs of ill health after a short time consuming junk food. For instance, puppies frequently suffer from bad skin and diarrhoea. Long-term exposure to the diet-related toxins listed in categories 1, 2 and 3 leads to diseases of body organs. Diseased organs produce more toxins, which enter the bloodstream and add to the spiral of worsening disease.<sup>7</sup>

5. Mostly pets suffer in silence; they can't speak in words. But when animals are affected by the above four categories of poison, their body language tells observant owners to seek help from the vet. Some vets say: "Stop! Stop feeding junk food." Sadly, though, most vets ignore categories 1, 2 and 3, and instead they diagnose diseased organs as mentioned in 4 (above). Treatment usually involves strong pharmaceuticals, which then contribute another level of toxic insult.<sup>8</sup>

You may ask: what about the genetic diseases, infectious diseases, parasitic diseases, the broken legs, other traumatic diseases and the diseases of old age? For sure, these are all important factors governing the well-being of our pet carnivores. But clearly, undeniably, pets worn down by the toxic effects of a junk food diet are at greater risk of succumbing to other diseases, and the recovery phase is likely to be longer, too.<sup>9</sup>

### Stop!

*Stop feeding junk pet food* is the first and best bit of advice I can give you—for the benefit of your pet(s), the human economy and the natural environment. By stopping doing harm, we take the first step on the road to doing good. It gains us some breathing space, allowing us to survey the scene, investigate further and harness the benefits of our newfound wisdom.

Actually, it's not so new. Hippocrates, the famous Greek physician of the fifth century BC, said: "Leave your drugs in the chemist's pot if you can heal your patients with food."<sup>10</sup>

So why did we lose sight of the ancient wisdom? Why did we ignore the teachings of nature? And of utmost importance, why is it so difficult to discuss, let alone reverse, the current orthodoxy? By way of explanation, let me tell you a story that, when taken to a conclusion, should provide medical, scientific, social and environmental benefits worth billions of dollars. Since 1955, when Juliette de Bairacli Levy published her *Complete Herbal Book for the Dog*, there have been mutterings about the inadequacy of processed-food diets for pet dogs and cats.<sup>11</sup> By the late 1980s Australian vets were passing comment, and by the

early 1990s they were registering open dissent. Dr Breck Muir often remarked about the foul odours given off from both ends of dogs fed canned food. In the December 1991 issue of the *Australian Veterinary Association News*, he wrote:<sup>12</sup>

### Canned pet food not the healthiest

The pet food situation has concerned me for some years, my feelings brought to this by the current competitive marketing of various dental work stations for veterinary use.

The scene as I see it goes like this: "Here is the best food ever made for your dog, Mrs Jones," handing her a can of commercial dog food or dry food, "but he may develop problems with his teeth, so here is a special toothbrush and paste for you to use to clean his teeth regularly, and then if that doesn't keep the periodontal

disease at bay we...have the very latest in dental equipment just like your own dentist has, and we can give Fido that perfectly enamelled ivory grin—that he would have had had you not fed him the commercial food in the first place.

Here we have the perfectly engineered commercial circle—a problem doesn't exist, so we create one, and then come up with all the remedial treatments.

Also in December 1991, my article "Oral Disease in Cats and Dogs" appeared in the newsletter of the Sydney University Post Graduate Foundation in Veterinary Science.<sup>13</sup>

The stench of stale blood, dung and pus emanating from the mouths of so many of my patients has finally provoked this eruption of dissent.

The sheer numbers passing through the practice, when extrapolated to the world situation, tell me that oral disease is the source of the greatest intractable pain and discomfort

experienced by our companion animals.

This is a great and mindless cruelty we visit upon our animals from the whelping box to the grave. Just imagine having a mouth ulcer or toothache for a lifetime.

Whilst the chemical contents (masquerading as nutrients) of junk pet foods are a major cause of concern, the new emphasis on oral hygiene opened an important chapter focusing on the *physical form* of the food. Indisputably, lions, tigers, wolves and all other wild predators don't have access to toothbrushes, dental floss or annual check-ups at the dentist. Nature equipped carnivores with the tools of trade to complete a very necessary evolutionary function: eating and thus regulating herbivore populations on planet Earth. Strong, precision tools need to be kept sharp and clean, and it's by the very act of a carnivore's gnawing and ripping its way through tough hide, muscle, sinew and bone that its teeth and gums get scrubbed, scraped and polished.

For dogs, cats and ferrets, the biological principles are exactly the same as for their wild cousins. Nutrients need to be raw and

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easily digested; physically, the food should be raw, tough and chewy.<sup>14</sup> In practical terms, that's a diet of whole chickens, rabbits, fish or similar. A raw meaty bones-based diet provides a good second-best option.

### Blowing the whistle, catching attention

If unnatural pet food injures the health of pets, then the cosy relationship between the pet food manufacturers and the veterinary profession injures pets, pet owners and the veterinary profession, too. Breck Muir complained:<sup>15</sup>

The infiltration of the commercial pet foods into our lives is one of the great success stories of the business world. Gross sales figures for a single product type is probably only bettered by petroleum products worldwide.

We as a profession have been led by the nose by vested interests into a current situation where most younger vets actually recommend commercial pet foods as the best available way of feeding domestic pets—because they have never known of any other way. Before they had their first pet they were bombarded with constant mass media advertising instilling into them that various commercial foods are the only way to go, and when they graduated and went to postgraduate nutrition courses again they had this idea reinforced by visiting lecturers who actually mentioned brand names in their notes.

Breck and I thought that blowing the whistle on the processed pet-food issue might trigger debate. We also hoped it might lead to reappraisal and resolution of a gathering crisis. However, we were about to be taught the first of several lessons: that the pet food industry/veterinary profession alliance is extensive, strong and hostile to criticism.

Upper echelons of the veterinary profession (veterinary associations, veterinary schools, research institutes) and junk food makers do deals behind the scenes. The Australian Veterinary Association sent Breck's letter to John Wingate, the then president of the Pet Food Manufacturers Association Inc. (now the Pet Food Industry Association of Australia Inc.). Wingate, in his self-serving response published alongside Breck's letter, told vets:<sup>16</sup>

The best way to feed a pet animal is with reputable brands of pet food... Analytically speaking, the...contents of these products are known and designed to satisfy the requirements of the animal as defined by the National Research Council of the US Academy of Sciences, which is the accumulation of the most up-to-date world-wide knowledge on the subject.

Yes, that's right: the junk pet food culture extends all the way up to the US Academy of Sciences—and along the way, animal welfare organisations, dog and cat breed societies, pet magazines, books, print and electronic media all sing from the junk pet food makers' song sheet.

But as practising vets ministering to the needs of a steady stream of sick pets, we found that our senses and our daily experience told us that the weight of so-called veterinary evidence was wrong. We delved deeper, looking in textbooks and research papers. And everywhere we stumbled, tripped and fell, we found

new evidence of the harmful effects of junk food.

Most pets are fed junk food and never clean their teeth. By simply cleaning diseased teeth and gums and changing pets over to a more natural diet, otherwise intractable diseases disappear—never to recur. Penicillin, hailed as a wonder drug, is used to treat some bacterial diseases but has no long-term disease prevention benefits. Using dentistry and diet, we could cure many and prevent most of the diseases afflicting pets.

### Tentacles of the monster

Communicating the good health, good news message to other vets became paramount, and so began a cat-and-mouse game with the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA). As fully-paid-up members of the association, we could submit letters to the letters page of the *AVA News*. The AVA and pet-food company sponsors were not so keen. Nevertheless, between December 1991 and March 1993, a small band of raw meaty bones enthusiasts managed to get 10 letters published—until *AVA News* announced it would run no further correspondence.<sup>17</sup>

At a stroke, AVA members were forbidden to discuss fundamental health issues. In response, and with the annual general meeting fast approaching, we drafted a motion calling on the AVA to lift the correspondence ban and to conduct a full investigation of the diet and disease issue. After "lively" debate, both parts of the motion were approved.<sup>18</sup>

The AVA report on the diet and disease link was released in February 1994, nine months after the 1993 AGM. Although "assisted" by pet food company vet Dr Barbara Fougere and other pet food company sympathisers,

the committee nevertheless reported that, instead of investigating the full impact of diet and disease, it had limited its enquiries:<sup>19</sup>

- 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.

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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.

Prophetic last words, indeed. Hands-on research in my practice has confirmed that diet and diet consistency are *the prime determining factors* in most diseases treated at suburban veterinary clinics. A range of previously hard-to-treat conditions disappeared as if by magic when dental care coupled with diet change became our top priority. Investigation of pets suffering an acquired immune deficiency revealed a startling restoration of immune function and return to health when the animals' foul mouths were treated and their diet changed to raw meaty bones. The implications are immense, and not just for AIDS sufferers.<sup>20</sup> It's relevant for all of us with an immune system and, as I postulated in a paper published in the *Journal of Veterinary Dentistry*, is likely significant to our understanding of the ecology of health and disease on planet Earth.<sup>21</sup>

The pet food industry/veterinary profession alliance, with a multibillion-dollar fighting fund, was in no mood to listen, except insofar as its members wished to consolidate their position. With so many problems associated with the feeding of junk food, they are adept at turning adversity to advantage. Their tentacles wrap around a problem; they pour money into research and present themselves as public benefactors. So it was with periodontal disease, which became the new hot topic in pet food company research labs and universities the world over. Their solution: a plethora of artificial dental products carrying inflated health claims—often endorsed by the Veterinary Oral Health Council.<sup>22</sup>

Getting the products to the end user depends on a willing sales force free from independent thought. Veterinarians enjoy status and respect; once indoctrinated, they are the ideal sales and marketing force. Accordingly, veterinarians are tutored in the mail, in advertisements and in visits from pet food company representatives. With minds filled with pet food company "facts", vets are then encouraged to support Dental Health Month, Pet Smile Month or similar. It's the month when pet owners are bombarded with advertisements and publicity stunts, urging them to visit their vet for a "free" dental check for their pets and receive a goody-bag full of samples and copies of those same company-

selected "facts".<sup>23</sup> Augmenting the propaganda push, there's a campaign to denigrate home-prepared and raw food through articles strategically placed in so-called professional journals.<sup>24</sup>

I, myself, have been targeted in a series of bogus disciplinary actions before the Veterinary Surgeons Board of NSW—a government regulatory body made up of AVA members. Threatened with deregistration, a year in prison or a fine of \$2,000, legal defence strategies became top priority. Documents on file weigh a combined 12 kilograms (26 pounds) and represent years of hard work and countless hours spent in lawyers' offices. Fortunately, the lawyers and I managed to withstand the harassment and I'm still registered as a vet.

### The price we pay

The following points provide a summary of the price we pay:

**1.** Junk food-induced cruelty, ill health and suffering affects the majority of the world's pets. Plentiful scientific evidence, experience and common sense confirm this fact.

**2.** Misuse of existing scientific paradigms and bogus administrative techniques produces a body of counterfeit science in the service of the junk pet food industry. The current mass-poisoning of pets starts with the first lie: that processed pet food is as good as or better than the natural alternative. So-called researchers swallow the lie and then misuse existing scientific methods and compliant professional journals to perpetuate and bolster the lie.

**3.** Broadly, three methodologies combine to form the scientific paradigm that underpins the junk pet food enterprise: i) an emphasis on treatment, not prevention, of ill health and disease; ii) dependence on the germ theory of disease as a fundamental axiom when in fact Pasteur, one of the originators of the germ theory, acknowledged that germs are secondary to other predisposing factors; and iii) dependence on reductionist research methods when in fact an holistic approach, taking account of all interactive forces, provides much more satisfactory evidence.

Consider that a natural, raw meaty bones-based diet acts as food and medicine for carnivores. If we apply the lessons to be learned from a study of the health and disease of carnivores resident at the extreme end of the nutritional spectrum, we can derive information of immense medical, scientific, economic and environmental value to us all. New attitudes and new paradigms are needed, but are blocked by the combined might of vested interests.

**4.** Economic consequences measure in the billions of dollars. Back in the 1860s, Jack Spratt, assisted by Charles Cruft, opened

### Endnotes

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the first processed dog-food business in London and started dog shows as a marketing tool.<sup>25</sup> Now, in 2007, *Business Week* estimates that "Americans spend an astonishing \$41 billion a year on their furry friends".<sup>26</sup> Fuelled by massive profits, the pet food marketing machine encourages us to acquire "furry friends", junk pet food and vet services.<sup>27</sup>

From dog droppings on the sole of your shoe through to the ecological footprint of giant pet-food factories, there are immense environmental costs that don't appear in the figures. Neither do the figures reveal the cost of the municipal pounds and welfare shelters needed for the millions of discarded pets. Dogs fed junk food are harder to train and more likely to bite their owners, leading to increased training and medical costs.<sup>28</sup> What price the scars on a child's face?

5. Failure of democratic, administrative and legal systems—whether due to oversight, incompetence or corruption—facilitates the junk pet food scam. Despite the moral and ethical problems associated with duping people into slowly poisoning their animals and the clear illegality of such cruel treatment, our politicians and lawyers have done little or nothing. Some animal welfare groups, purporting to care for the plight of pets, consort with the junk pet food companies and are more a part of the problem than the solution.<sup>29</sup>

The media, our watchdogs, mostly remain in their kennel, too scared to comment. Journalists working for the *Australian* newspaper, the Sydney *Sun-Herald* and the UK *Sunday Independent* researched and wrote extensive articles that were never published.<sup>30</sup> Other media outlets engage in self-censorship and publish tepid accounts or no accounts at all.

## Pet food recall

Whilst we discuss the pet food scam, we should keep in mind that two giant chocolate manufacturers, Mars and Nestlé, jostle for supremacy of the pet food industry. They span the globe and have plans for vast expansions into India and China.<sup>31,32</sup> In the second tier, other large conglomerates—Colgate-Palmolive, Procter & Gamble, Heinz and Del Monte—compete for consumer loyalty. The companies may seek to differentiate themselves and their products but, in fact, we know there's a sameness about them all—as was amply demonstrated in the March 2007 Menu Foods recall. Dogs and cats in North America were ill and dying of acute renal failure, traced to the output of one contract pet food manufacturer, Menu Foods.<sup>33</sup> At first it was thought that rat poison had contaminated batches of "food", but as the story

unfolded it turned out that melamine, a chemical used for manufacturing plastic counter-tops, glue and fertiliser, had been added into Chinese shipments of wheat gluten affecting almost 100 different brands.<sup>34</sup>

Acute renal failure may be uncommon, but *chronic* renal failure is not. Research carried out by Nestlé revealed that the mean life-span of cats fed exclusively commercial cat food and receiving regular veterinary attention was less than 12 years of age, with death largely attributable to renal failure or cancer.<sup>35</sup> The Mars corporation, advertising its Pedigree *bone-shaped* chews, told vets that "80% of dogs over the age of three have gum disease" and that "dental problems are known to increase with age and are increasingly being linked to vital organ disease—most notably kidneys and liver".<sup>36</sup> "Chronic renal disease is a leading cause of death in dogs and cats"—says manufacturer Royal Canin.<sup>37</sup>

## Future prospects

What does the future hold? Who can tell? Peering through my crystal ball, I see a future of constant change. In a complex world of competing interests, some change will be for the good and some for the bad. Let's be under no illusions: big, bad forces seek to stifle dissent, and we are merely individuals of good will. Echoing Edmund Burke: "All that is needed for evil to prosper is for people of good will to do nothing."<sup>38</sup> Let's do something—*anything*—that helps the animals. Let's start today.

## Editor's Note:

Due to space constraints, we are unable to publish the complete text of Dr Lonsdale's article. To view this, visit <http://www.rawmeatybones.com/articles/nexus.pdf>.

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Veterinarian and author Dr Tom Lonsdale, BVetMed, MRCVS, graduated from the Royal Veterinary College, University of London, in 1972. In the 1980s he became aware of the dietary disease epidemics affecting the animals under his care. Since 1991, Dr Lonsdale has campaigned to bring the information to public attention. In 2001, his landmark book *Raw Meaty Bones: Promote Health* was published (reviewed in NEXUS 12/03), followed in 2005 by *Work Wonders: Feed Your Dog Raw Meaty Bones* (reviewed in 13/04). Dr Lonsdale can be contacted by email at [tom@rawmeatybones.com](mailto:tom@rawmeatybones.com). For more information, visit his website, <http://www.rawmeatybones.com>.

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