



## Disturbing the peace

*The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.*

MAHATMA GANDHI<sup>1</sup>

Natural diets based on raw meaty bones promote the health of pets, the human economy and the natural environment but, I admit, I used to believe the opposite. As a 1972 graduate of the Royal Veterinary College at the University of London I was trained to believe that pet dogs and cats are best fed on processed food hygienically sealed in cans and packets. Oral disease and ‘dog breath’ were scarcely considered, being accepted as a commonplace condition of the domestic carnivore. As a student, sitting at the back of the class, it suited me to subscribe to the prevailing orthodoxy.

Fortunately, discussion with colleagues and the hard lessons of practical experience later overturned my faith in the commercial offerings—but it took time. There was no ‘Road to Damascus’ style of conversion but rather a series of events over a number of years. Meanwhile I fought against the creeping realisation—after all the majority of my profession still believed in processed foods and the regulatory authorities were known to deal harshly with those who took an independent line. When my inner turmoil finally subsided and the contradictions dissolved I was convinced that I should actively help my clients towards the new understanding.

Where previously diet hadn’t featured in my consultations—whether for serious disease or routine health checks—it was now elevated to a central position. The usual starting point for the

discussions involved a consideration of the dental health of the animal patient. Bad breath, unsightly staining of teeth, and sore and bleeding gums were, once pointed out, things that concerned my clients. And for those clients who embarked on the new way of feeding their dog or cat the benefits soon flowed. Gone were the bad breath and bleeding gums and in their stead the pets developed a new vitality.

Of course, we were on the lookout for problems of any kind. Raw bones were said to be responsible for broken teeth, constipation and nasty bacterial diseases. Happily, in the short term, none of those things came to pass. As for the long term no one could be sure because that was in the future. But clients, seeing the short-term benefits, were prepared to trust in the future. My staff and I gained in confidence too. We began to streamline our service and illustrate our message with charts and diagrams.

But if this information on more natural feeding was of benefit to our clients the same could be said for the clients of veterinarians everywhere. However the TV was an ever constant source of artificial pet food ads and the pet food propaganda mill continued to churn within the veterinary profession. Students were actively encouraged to recommend processed food—university nutrition lectures frequently being conducted by guest lecturers from the pet food companies. Magazine advertisements and ‘scientific’ articles extolled the benefits of commercial diets and company-sponsored ‘educational’ meetings kept veterinarians informed.

In August 1991 the Uncle Ben’s pet food company, a division of the Mars Corporation, sponsored a series of symposia in Australia. Two speakers hailed from the Royal Veterinary College, London, and two from the Mars research and development institute, Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition—‘Waltham, the World’s Leading Authority on Pet Care and Nutrition’ proclaims their logo.<sup>2</sup> Dr Alan Bennet, my associate in the veterinary practice, and I decided to attend the Sydney meeting. Our objectives were twofold: discover what was on the menu and then ask some public, hard to answer questions.

Living and working in the outer western suburbs of Sydney meant that we had a one hour drive to the meeting—an easy run against the ebbing rush hour traffic. By the time we had reversed the car into the

parking bay at the Australian Veterinary Association headquarters, the venue for the meeting, we had already enjoyed a lively conversation on the failings of the pet food industry/veterinary profession alliance.

The meeting was full to overflowing, with a video link to an upstairs room. As latecomers we took seats in front of the video screen, where we were obliged to watch and listen—asking questions of the video screen was pointless. In the event the speakers were protected from us and more importantly we were protected from ourselves—our line in questions would not have been welcome. Time soon passed and as the evening drew to a close the chairman called for a round of applause for the speakers. Alan and I continued to stare at the video screen which flickered and went blank and signalled the time to leave.

As we descended the stairs and crossed the car park our voices returned. Infuriated by the sessions, at least we could laugh and rage together on the journey home. For many of the other 200 veterinarians the evening probably reinforced their own (opposite) prejudices. Whether the extra reinforcement of the company message justified the expense is not something that can easily be judged. It suits my sense of justice to know that the evening acted as a turning point—henceforth I would seek to alert the veterinary profession to the dangers of artificial pet foods.

### **First show of dissent**

In winter the work in a small-animal veterinary practice slows down. There are not so many fleas, the snakes and ticks are hibernating, and folks stay at home with the dog. With the extra free time available I fretted over what I hoped would be a decisive article in repudiation of the artificial pet food industry/veterinary profession alliance. Of course I was handicapped by lack of detailed research knowledge but set against this were my experience as a clinician and what that had convinced me of. Within days the initial draft was ready and within three weeks the typewritten version was dispatched to Dr Douglas Bryden, Director of The Post Graduate Foundation in Veterinary Science of the University of Sydney. I hoped to gain publication in the bimonthly newsletter *Control and Therapy*.

It is true that I was aiming for maximum impact without alien-

ating the audience and, like any self-protective scientist, was anxious not to say anything that could be found to be embarrassingly inaccurate. Favouring the direct approach, I spoke as if the problems and their solution were self-evident.

### ORAL DISEASE IN CATS AND DOGS

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, tells me that oral disease is the source of the greatest intractable pain and discomfort experienced by our companion animals. This is

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

#### THE INTERNAL FACTORS ARE THESE:

Puppies and kittens cut their deciduous teeth between 2 and 6 weeks of age. An inevitable consequence of this is gingivitis.

A diet of processed food ensures lack of gum massage and the gingivitis persists. The growing animal develops grooming behaviour and adds hair and faecal material to the accumulated food scraps clogging the interdental spaces.

Between 4 and 6 months of age the permanent teeth erupt into a soup of blood, pus and saliva. The gingivitis is now well established and not infrequently one finds a young kitten or puppy with a complete set of deciduous teeth hanging from inflamed gingival shreds.

Even on a diet of processed food the deciduous teeth must eventually fall out. The permanent teeth come to occupy a

diseased mouth and by this time the animal has learned not to chew on anything because of the pain involved.

The exquisite mechanism of teeth and gums designed by nature to be cleaned, massaged and stressed in use is left to rot. Compare mining machinery properly maintained which can excavate a mountain but by disuse can be rendered useless.

A lifetime of inescapable pain is bad enough. The sequelae of endocarditis, iliac thrombosis, nephritis, and all those other entities attributable to a permanent septic focus finally condemn this situation as being intolerable.

THE EXTERNAL FACTORS ARE THESE:

Foremost are the pet food manufacturers who have effectively promoted their 'complete diet ... only water needed'. Along with petroleum and coffee, pet food is one of the biggest industries world wide.

Reacting to the now universal dental needs of our animals, the dental instrument, the dental machine and even the imitation bone industries have flourished.

I believe many veterinary practitioners have reacted passively, perhaps providing some dental care as an afterthought and virtually no advice. Since cats and dogs don't complain, owners don't realise and don't seek advice. Many vets just don't seem to be proactive in this vital area.

As vets we need to provide more than palliative care. Brushing teeth and regular prophylaxis [dental treatment under general anaesthetic] are not enough when advice on diet and food to massage the gums is so vitally important.

WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

*a. The internal system*

Simple, give our cats and dogs their basic rights of a healthy functioning mouth. Supply raw chicken wings, chicken necks or ox tail to young/small kittens and puppies when they most want to chew and explore. Help them to control their two bouts of physiological gingivitis before it becomes pathological.

Older larger dogs need raw bones and cats need raw meat on the bone.

*b. The external system*

The external commerce-driven system may take a while to dismantle. It did not exist before the 50s [it originated in England in the 1860s and flourished after World War II<sup>3</sup>] and now it seems such an inescapable part of life. It may take a while to alter course.

The veterinary profession can do much to re-educate itself and in turn the public. A few practice surveys and university-based research projects would set the course.

The pet food manufacturers will need advice on the problems caused by processed food. One pet food company gives biannual 'prophs' to its research animals...

However, they may be persuaded to voluntarily print cautionary advice on their packaging.

WHAT BENEFITS CAN WE EXPECT?

Innumerable. Pets will be fed on cheap unprocessed byproducts some of the time. The environment will benefit, clients will be an average \$1000 per animal/per lifetime better off. Certainly the pets can be expected to live longer as they enjoy their lives seeking to 'steal the bones out of the freezer'. As vets we will be happy to see more pain-free, healthier pets and grateful owners.<sup>4</sup>

Would Douglas Bryden, the editor, publish such a straightforward set of pronouncements? Outright rejection seemed possible. As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long for his answer. Two changes were deemed necessary, otherwise the article would be published as submitted. This was good news for I knew that the *Control and Therapy* series is widely read and has an influence beyond Australian shores. Accordingly I accepted the editorial changes and awaited the anticipated publication in October.

Meanwhile life in veterinary practice, which is never dull, gained an unusual richness. Everywhere Alan and I looked, tripped and stumbled we found more connections and implications of our central

hypothesis—that artificial pet foods underpin most pet diseases. We eagerly gobbled up the new revelations. For us it was like stepping onto a new and previously undiscovered continent. At times we came close to pinching ourselves to ensure that we were not in a trance or completely self-deluded.

One day in October the mail bundle arrived, with a familiar envelope from the Post Graduate Foundation in Veterinary Science. I opened the envelope and scanned the documents. Nowhere could I find the article. Thomas by name and doubting by nature, I first checked the documents again. When the evidence was undeniable I wondered if Dr Bryden had thought better of publishing the article. Just as in science, where the simplest answer is usually the best, so it is in life. The article had missed the October deadline and would appear in the December edition.

Coincidences and chance encounters have helped fuel the challenge to orthodox views on diet and disease in pets. Serendipity, some might say. But in any case a chance meeting with my old mate Breck Muir was certainly to make a difference. The occasion was a veterinary meeting where general practitioner vets gathered to hear a mixture of scientific and commercial presentations and enjoy a chat and the hospitality of pharmaceutical suppliers.

Back in the early 1980s Breck used to complain of the stench associated with canned-food-fed dogs. At our reunion the conversation soon turned to our common dislike of the commercial offerings. Glad to be in the company of like-minded vets, Breck, Alan Bennet and I joined forces and sought to impress our ideas on a few bystanders. Progress was slow, which led me to mention the coming publication. Breck straightaway said that he would join in the effort and would submit a letter to the monthly *Australian Veterinary Association News*.<sup>5</sup> The timing was uncanny as, with the shorter publication schedule of *AVA News*, both of our pieces appeared in December 1991.

### **The debate gets under way**

Breck came straight to the point in his published letter. Under a headline proclaiming ‘Canned pet food not the healthiest’ he condemned the modern way of feeding pets.

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... 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...

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.

My experience with commercial canned and dry pet foods is that they:

- are a prime cause of periodontal disease in all breeds of dogs and cats
- are associated with an increased incidence of gastric dilatation and/or torsion [gas accumulation and twisting of the stomach with generally fatal consequences]
- are a cause of diarrhoea in a substantial number of dogs
- cause intestinal 'allergies' with associated dermal pruritus [skin itch] and behavioural changes in a significant number of cases
- are a prime cause of flatulence and offensive odour in dogs—some brands [of pet food] more than others.

For readers of the *AVA News* this was their first notification of dissent in the ranks. Of Australia's 6800 vets about 4800 are paid-up members of the professional association. Membership is not cheap. For \$430 annually members obtain a range of social and professional services including publication of a journal of refereed articles. Most vets lend their moral support and pay their dues without taking a

close interest in the internal workings which, as with most organisations, is left to the few.

For Breck and me this was our first experience of dealing with the few in control of the AVA. We were delighted that Breck's letter had been published but concerned that pet food manufacturers had been given the opportunity to respond in the same edition of *AVA News*. In due course we were to discover the significance of the special relationship between the parties, but for now the response was published under the title 'Far Fetched Claims'.

The President of the Pet Food Manufacturers Association of Australia Inc signed the Association's statement, which sought to nullify dissent and shepherd the wayward sheep back into the fold. 'We are surprised by the content of Dr Muir's letter, which is an attack on the integrity of the pet food manufacturers of this country' was the opening line. One and half columns later the President concluded: 'With the economic strife Australia now faces, we would have thought it more appropriate to encourage ever increasing standards of excellence in a successful export industry such as the prepared pet food industry. Instead this letter attempts to cut the "tall poppy" down.'

Breck and I discussed tactics on the telephone. We were pleased to see debate getting under way and both submitted letters for the next edition of *AVA News*. Breck ridiculed the Pet Food Manufacturers' letter and condemned modern marketing methods which promoted the idea of dogs slurping their food in 30 seconds. This, he remarked, was good for the manufacturers but not for 'Fido'. My letter referred to income that American veterinarians derive from dental and related diseases. 'Why is it that 40 percent [estimated] of US veterinary time is devoted to this cascade of misery?' I asked. 'Simply because the pet food manufacturers hold such sway and have effectively persuaded almost everyone (but not Breck Muir) that their pulverised, packaged processed pap is all that pets need.'

In the March 1992 edition two more correspondents joined in—both from the state of Victoria. John Sandford spoke out against the artificial pet food culture and concluded: 'The challenge then, is up to the veterinary profession to be more honest, realistic and [to] actively promote preventive dental care and a balanced diet—in a

practical way bones, bones and more bones.’ Dr Duncan Hall, a pet food company vet, sought to deflect criticism away from the industry and on to dental plaque. ‘Plaque is not a food residue’, he declared. His final paragraph revealed that the industry is aware of and seeks to ameliorate the plaque problem.

The pet food industry currently commits considerable financial resources towards researching pet nutrition and product development. An example of this is the work at the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition where a technique for staining and objectively grading plaque development in dogs is now being used to examine the effect of different food textures on canine dental health. The ultimate aim of such research is to develop products which can assist in preventing the development of this complex and distressing disease.

Breck fired back in the April edition: ‘Duncan K Hall’s letter is a good example of how the English language can be used to cast shadows of varying intensity on the original meaning of the written word! Neither Dr Lonsdale nor myself stated that “plaque is food residue”’.

Those who specialise in veterinary dentistry could be expected to lead the way on plaque prevention strategies, but Stephen Coles, President of the Australian Veterinary Dental Society, sought to justify the prevailing orthodoxy.

Veterinary dentistry has not been invented as a new source of income for vets... Dental disease is not a pet food industry conspiracy... The increasing prevalence of periodontal disease has resulted from several factors... Periodontal disease is a bacterial disease... Many breeds have been altered genetically and cannot chew bones... Some pets with moderate to severe periodontal disease should have multiple extractions.<sup>6</sup>

While Dr Coles acknowledged the benefits of bones—‘most dogs fed a good bone once weekly have better teeth’—he advised pet owners that: ‘These should be fed in conjunction with a nutritionally sound diet.’ A message acceptable to artificial pet food manufacturers, pet

toothbrush makers and a majority of veterinarians.

There could be no mistaking the position adopted by Dr Ian Billingham writing in the June 1992 edition of the *AVA News*. Ian is credited with being the first Australian veterinarian to raise the issue of natural diets for dogs. His clients, tutored on the dietary needs of pet carnivores, reaped the benefits and in 1986 Ian wrote down his philosophy for the benefit of the veterinary profession.<sup>7</sup> The ability of the profession to ignore essential truths meant that Ian's article went largely unnoticed. In 1989 he handed me his writings. When, in 1992, I tracked him down and encouraged him to participate in the debate Ian explained that he had cancelled his AVA membership, no longer read the *AVA News* and was unaware of the controversy. Gladly he took up the pen in defence of his essential truths:

As a profession we will shortly be hanging our heads in shame as we realise that we have acted as unpaid sales staff for an industry that has not promoted the health of our clients' pets. An industry that has pushed products that are clearly and demonstrably responsible for much of the misery suffered by pet dogs and cats in the western world while generating huge profits.

Publication of the *AVA News* became a focal point each month. Prior to publication it was necessary to have letters prepared, proofread by colleagues and sometimes checked by my legal adviser. On the day when the *News* arrived there was a general flurry and downing of tools until the latest exchanges were read out loud. Interpreting the shades of meaning was never easy but always enjoyable. Alan and Jason Pollard, the new vet in our practice, would provide opinions and then there was the need to consult by telephone with Breck Muir. Occasionally a month would go by without any mention of raw bones. Did this mean, we wondered, that the AVA authorities had summarily terminated the correspondence? We expected some form of gag or retaliation, and sure enough our premonitions proved correct.

## **An unfortunate setback**

‘Periodontal campaign—wearisome’, said the headline above Dr Hugh Southwood’s letter in the March 1993 *AVA News*. Despite his suggestion that ‘most small animal clinicians agree with Tom that raw bones or some other form of oral hygiene measure should form part of a pet’s life’, he followed with: ‘Finally, I congratulate the pet food industry on their patience and tolerance in the face of this attack. I have no vested interest in this matter yet my patience is exhausted.’ More important than Hugh Southwood’s fatigue was the seemingly bland statement at the foot of the column. ‘*AVA News* believes that this issue has been aired fully over the last year and does not intend to run further correspondence.—Ed.’

We felt insulted as much by their method as by their message; this was the first and only official AVA response. Without prior warning they had imposed the guillotine. ‘Aired fully’—how could anyone believe that? Nevertheless, sixteen letters had been published, ten for the campaign and six against. Of those against, two came from pet food industry sources, three from veterinary dentists and one from Hugh Southwood. Notably there were no letters appearing from veterinary academics on either side of the debate, despite the implied criticisms of veterinary teaching. We shall examine the motives of those living in the ‘ivory tower’ later, but by remaining silent they managed a temporary postponement of their embarrassment. However these are peripheral issues when one considers that veterinarians were now severely limited in discussing both diet affecting all their patients, and periodontal disease affecting most of them. Paid pet food advertisements and other pieces favourable to the industry continued to appear.

Something had to be done and done fast, but the question was What? Followed by How? Resignation from the Australian Veterinary Association was one option but we rejected it, partly on principle and partly as an act of defiance against the AVA.

In the end Jason and I prepared a notice of motion for the forthcoming AVA annual general meeting.

**NOTICE OF MOTION**—AVA AGM, JUPITERS CASINO,  
GOLD COAST, FRIDAY MAY 21 1993

A resourceful AVA must provide forums for the membership in order that they may better serve animals, people and the wider environment.

The current *AVA News* letters page ban on open discussion of diet and disease in companion animals hinders this process.

A committee, without present or past affiliations to the processed pet food industry, must be formed to report on all aspects of diet and disease in companion animals.

The ban on member contributions on this vital subject must be lifted.

TOM LONSDALE AND JASON POLLARD

With the conference just three weeks away, preparations were made at a gallop. Compiling a 'Fact File' for the conference was fun. Susan Rutter had been helping with secretarial duties and now we worked closely on the project. The File contained a mixture of scientific truth, common sense observations, and various comments from the artificial pet food advocates. Here is a selection:

- Public relations manager from Uncle Ben's Australia (makers of PAL), Doug Hyslop said Mr Lonsdale's claims were "ridiculous", however he did recommend a couple of bones each week. *Hills Mercury*, 30 June 1992
- Dr Coles, President of the Australian Veterinary Dentists Society said dogs should chew bones twice a week and cats should chew chicken necks once a week to help prevent dental disease. Dr Stephen Coles, reported in *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 May 1992
- Most dogs are now on more convenience foods and we have to accept that. The best thing to do would be to go and give your dog probably an ox tail with the hide still on it once a week but that's just not socially acceptable. Dr S Coles, *The Investigators*, ABC 27 April 1993
- A single letter in *The Lancet* initiated the medical profession response to suggestions that thalidomide had toxic

consequences. It would appear to us that a similar obligation rests with the veterinary profession if the consumption of dietary products by animals leads to an unnecessary build-up of toxins. Rather than closed forums of debate, we believe they should be opened and accordingly place this motion on the agenda.

Half of the last page was given over to a cartoon depicting a faceless giant—with puppets in his pocket and one suspended from the ends of his dirty fingers.

### **Striking it lucky on the Gold Coast**

Sydney to the Queensland Gold Coast is best travelled over two days but can be achieved in one long day's drive. As a Queenslander Jason knew the route well. His pleasure at the prospect of a few days at home was balanced by apprehension. Few other young veterinarians would be at the conference, none of whom would have an item on the AGM agenda.

It was late, raining and cold as we cruised into that artificial pleasure and retirement strip known as the Gold Coast. A few turns off the highway we drew up at Jason's house and he disembarked. Tired from the journey I was reluctant to search for a cheap motel and instead headed for the opulent Jupiters Casino and Conference Centre. Discount rates applied for delegates and yes, a room was available on the executive floor alongside the AVA officers. In retrospect, setting up camp in the midst of the enemy was quite a coup. Our proximity and apparent constant activity, I now believe, gave the impression of a well-planned operation.

Jason may have been nervous but, apart from when he was warned that the Veterinary Board were taking a keen interest, showed great courage. Word soon spread that we had arrived and we were often to be seen at the lobby desk collecting and sending faxes. The next day, during the coffee interval, we raced around the various lecture rooms dropping our Fact File onto chairs. We felt like daredevil terrorists hurling grenades, but in reality it was more like we were planting land mines. By the end of the day many of the delegates had read the File,

leading us to believe that our 'explosive device' was having an effect.

Judging whether this effect was assisting our cause was not easy. We had checked and crosschecked the Fact File for discrepancies and a solicitor had approved the final draft. The initiative was ours, with the AVA attempting to manoeuvre and respond as best they could. By Thursday afternoon word came to us that Jakob Malmo, the Acting President, would like to meet with Jason and me. At six we gathered in the twilight on the terrace of his suite. Bill Scanlan, AVA Treasurer, was also there, as was Michael Banyard, the President elect.

They sought to appear composed but instead their resentment took control. Our disruptive tactics, we ought to know, were unnecessary and counterproductive. Didn't we realise that the Executive always acted in the best interests of the AVA? Their plan was for the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association (ASAVA) to carry out an investigation into the connection between diet and disease. This, Jakob assured us, was the competent authority to investigate and report on our claims. We should withdraw our motion.

In time I came to understand that Michael Banyard exerted influence as a small animal practitioner with a doctorate in immunology. Michael, like the others, doubted that there was much in our claims, even if they were based on the work of scientists. After all, he reasoned, if there was so much of consequence, and scientists being scientists, why were they not rushing to claim the kudos of being the first to make the discoveries? At the time I felt this to be a rather difficult paradox to explain in a few seconds. However, keen not to show any sign of uncertainty I looked him in the eye and spoke about this being a political and philosophical matter to do with a 'paradigm shift' in the affairs not only of the AVA but of veterinary science generally. I suggested that the average scientist might be interested in playing safe rather than risking ridicule over unconfirmed theories.

It made no difference what we said—the AVA officers were unwilling to budge. Should we compromise?, was my nagging thought. Could the ASAVA be trusted to adopt suitable terms of reference and then complete a thorough investigation? Should we persist with our democratic appeal to the membership despite the knowledge that many members still lacked a full grasp of the issues? A loss was likely

on the floor of the meeting but perhaps, by demonstrating a degree of AVA intransigence, we could pave the way for a later victory.

In the end, perhaps the main motive for persisting with our motion was less noble. Having got the AVA Executive to a showdown we were keen to see the matter through.

The AGM proceedings were under way as Jason and I sat down at the back of the auditorium. Douglas Bryden, I noticed, was positioned in the middle of the room. As part of my address to the meeting I intended tabling a chapter from the Post Graduate Committee book *Veterinary Dentistry*. Although I had written the chapter, because it was as yet unpublished I needed Douglas's consent to making it public. I moved alongside him and whispered my request, to which he warmly assented.

Jakob Malmo, the Acting President, introduced my talk in a flat voice, seeking to establish calm. I approached the lectern from where I could see a full meeting of the AVA establishment and a heavy contingent of pet food company vets. A shouting match had been predicted, but as I began to speak I knew that I had to steady myself and avoid provoking anger. Ten minutes, the allotted time, soon passed and Jakob opened the motion for debate. Three prominent veterinarians spoke against the motion, but nobody spoke in support. Prospects looked poor, at which moment Douglas Bryden rose to his feet. 'I wish to move an amendment to the motion which may not be seen as speaking for the motion or against it.' His measured tones had delegates leaning forward as he spoke. (His remarks are set out in Appendix A.)

The amendment Douglas moved was:

That in keeping with the AVA policy of providing forums for the membership, the AVA establish an independent committee to prepare a report on the interaction between diet and disease in companion animals.

The debate meandered along on procedural matters without the anticipated fury. Pet food company veterinarians sat quietly watching. Professor Mike Rex, from the University of Queensland, sitting

immediately behind Jason and me, moved ‘That the motion be now put’. To Jason’s relief this motion obtained a large majority, meaning debate was curtailed, and consequently he was not required to speak.

Now for the fateful moment. Jakob put our motion and asked for all those in favour to raise their hands. Jason and I stretched our hands to the rafters and scanned the room for supporters. Not one was to be seen. (One veterinarian later told us that he voted with us but was hidden from view.) So this was the end, or so we thought. But fate was playing strange tricks. Dr Bryden’s amendment was deemed to be sufficiently different from the original motion that it should be treated as a separate entity.

This time Jakob’s request for a show of hands evoked a different response—the Bryden amendment was supported 46 votes for and 38 against.

As icing on the cake another motion, effectively giving a nod to the final point of our original one, was put to the vote:

That the *AVA News* Editor continue to exercise judgment in publishing letters in the *AVA News*.

This motion also gained majority support—reaffirming editorial discretion but implying that it should be exercised with care.

Professor Rex was first to congratulate us in a public and uninhibited way. Such a gesture from an elder statesman of the profession was not to be underestimated. Douglas Bryden’s speech had been the decisive factor. Douglas’s first words to us after the vote were that the hard work was just beginning.

AVA members appeared to have asserted themselves—against the wishes of the Executive—for the community. No one was admitting defeat; in fact quite a number were claiming victory. Pet food industry vets were seen heading for the telephone and soon the wire was alive with their media release.

## **VETERINARIANS FOCUS ON GOOD NUTRITION AND PET HEALTH**

The Annual General Meeting of the Australian Veterinary Association focussed on the importance of nutrition to the overall health and well-being of companion animals by setting up a committee to review scientific data on the role of nutrition and disease.

The Petfood Manufacturers Association of Australia, representing all major manufacturers, endorsed the establishment of a committee composed of informed veterinarians and nutritional experts and believes this will benefit the welfare of our pets through a greater scientific understanding of their nutritional requirements.

The PFMA particularly welcomes an investigation into the therapeutic benefits of so-called ‘natural diets’, which it believes are being promoted without any semblance of scientific support.

The PFMA endorses the Australian Veterinary Association as the appropriate body to conduct the review and looks forward to the findings of such a committee and the greater understanding of the importance of a balanced diet, as part of responsible pet ownership.

## **No respite**

Buoyed by the resolutions of the AGM—I must confess misreading the results as being a sign that the membership were beginning to see things our way—I returned to the letters column of the *AVA News*:

## **PROBITY IN FINANCIAL AFFAIRS**

Open discussion and democratic principles proved their worth once again. Only good can come of the establishment of an independent committee to report on the interaction of diet and disease in companion animals. Independence is the key and ‘perception is everything’. The committee must not only be independent but be seen to be independent...

But the AVA Executive reverted to their earlier intentions. They asked Dr Jill Maddison, president of the ASAVA, to nominate a researcher. She nominated Associate Professor David Watson, veterinary physician at Sydney University, as the principal researcher. Dr Peter Groves, an epidemiologist, and Douglas Bryden were to be the other members of the Committee. Rather than covering diet and *all* diseases the Committee brief was limited: 'To explore the relationship between diet and oral health in dogs and cats and the possibility that poor oral health may contribute to other disease conditions in these species.' No original research was to be performed, just a review of the existing literature. Although the AGM motion called for an independent committee, Dr Watson acknowledged the assistance provided by veterinary dentist Stephen Coles and Uncle Ben's pet nutrition adviser Dr Barbara Fougere.

Despite the fact that the Committee raked over (what I believe was) old misapplied science the results were worth waiting for. The *AVA News* of February 1994 carried a front page article:

### **DIET AND DISEASE LINK—FINAL REPORT**

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'.

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.

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 origin 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 size, shape and consistency of individual pieces. Until data becomes available on 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.

In our battles with the AVA their constant cry was that there was an absence of evidence and as such our claims were without foundation. Now at a cost of \$7000 they had destroyed their own argument and elevated our claims by providing official endorsement. Previously the information was known, but scattered throughout the literature. Gathered together in one place with the added advantage of being a 'current' piece of work, the findings, so we thought, would demand attention. If an AVA committee found so heavily in our favour what were the real implications?

In February 1994 Breck Muir and I were engaged in other strategies, and now the preliminary report gave us a welcome boost. As candidates in the AVA elections we assumed, quite wrongly, that our vindication by the Committee would provide us with extra votes and the possibility of gaining election. In the event I received 18 percent of the vote for president of the association and Breck received 38 percent for the position of board member. (My vote of around 8 to 10 percent at subsequent elections reflected the true level of support for the radical anti pet food stance.) Official announcement of the election results was scheduled for the AGM on the last day of the annual conference. The full report of the Committee was to be made public at the same event.

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## Pressure rise, pressure drop: the 1994 Canberra Annual Conference

Breck and I anticipated that the full Diet and Disease Report would build on the preliminary report. This we reasoned would place considerable obligations upon the AVA, whose Code of Conduct states:

Veterinarians occupy a trusted, privileged position in society because of unique knowledge and training... members agree to act in a manner consistent with the following principles:

- The primary concern of the profession is for the welfare of animals...
- That veterinarians, individually, act to promote cohesion within the profession and the trust of the profession by the general public.

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**we believed that veterinarians should neither recommend nor sell artificial pet foods.**

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According to the Code and in light of the Report we believed that veterinarians should neither recommend nor sell artificial pet foods. Furthermore, we believed that the AVA ought to terminate sponsorship

arrangements with the companies, correct past mistakes and seek to promote healthy diets. These ideas we enshrined in two motions for debate at the annual general meeting.

With the election behind us all strands of our campaign converged on Canberra, the nation's capital and venue of the AVA annual conference. Our plan was for Breck to fly down for the AGM on the final day of the conference. Michael Scasny, a young associate veterinarian, and I would travel down by car a few days earlier. Canberra, being the seat of government, is also home to a large press contingent. We hoped to contact members of the press and persuade them of the importance of the issues confronting the veterinary profession. In support of our submissions we carried various documents, videos and 500 copies of a four page press release. The release said:

## 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.

The press release detailed various activities of the AVA and concluded:

The outline report of the Diet and Disease Subcommittee has regained sight of the need to protect domestic pets and consumers from the unwarranted side effects of feeding processed food. In anticipation of this fact two motions allowing for

beneficial change are to be debated at the 11 March, 1994 AGM. It is to be hoped that the AVA Executive will recognise the national interest and steer away from their commercial affiliations. The funny thing is that the outline report contains nothing that cannot be readily gleaned from any university or pet food company library. It is ironical that those with best access to libraries have, since the debate commenced in December, 1991, either put up great resistance or been slow to act.

Accompanying the text was a cartoon, the preliminary Diet and Disease Report and a letter from Dr Jill Maddison rebutting suggestions of conflict of interest over her consultancy to Friskies Pet Foods.

Four hours after leaving Riverstone Veterinary Hospital, Michael Scasny and I reached the leafy streets of Canberra. Luckily we found a convenient hotel in which to set up headquarters. Once established we hailed a cab and set off in search of Pekka Paavonpera, *AVA News* editor and the press liaison officer. In the job for the last twelve months or so, he was a man I'd learnt to admire for his sense of humour and firm grasp on reality. We hoped he would provide us with introductions to journalists.

As we neared the press office in the conference building Pekka came striding down the corridor towards us. His look of recognition faded to dismay—he was happy to see us but not happy to be seen with us. In an instant he reached for the nearest door, the entrance to a storage closet, pulled on the handle and pushed us inside. Squeezed in the dark space we informed Pekka of our plans and asked for any 'hot news'. Pekka protested that, while there had been plenty of talk, as an AVA employee he could not divulge information—if we wished to speak with the press we should go to the Parliament House complex where newspaper and TV reporters had offices.

A short cab ride later we rolled up to Parliament House with the clear impression that the adventure was under way and going our way. Peter Harvey, a well-known TV reporter, appeared at the press lobby entrance. Without hesitation he provided directions on how to deliver our message. Soon Michael Scasny and I were tape-recording interviews with journalists keen to learn of our story.

Before leaving the Parliament building we dropped copies of our media release in letter boxes belonging to the various radio and TV stations. Our luck appeared to be riding high such that by the time we arrived back at the conference centre there was already a clutch of telephone messages—radio stations wanted interviews and television stations wished to arrange film sessions. In the ensuing broadcasts the AVA became unwilling participants, their representatives trying to remain calm under pressure.

Surely the AVA would waver and turn under the barrage of unfavourable publicity, or so I thought. With the AGM scheduled for Friday morning we did not have long to wait for the verdict. Breck arrived on the early flight from Sydney and after quick consultation we made our way into the auditorium. As we walked to our seats I surveyed the 200 or so assembled veterinarians for signs of a friendly gesture. Instinctively I knew that our run of good luck had come to an end. The three and half hour marathon was described by *AVA News* as ‘vigorous debates on a series of controversial issues’. Fully one year later one veterinarian complained: ‘I was stunned by the level of animosity palpable in the room, and appalled by what Tim Winton refers to as the “bed rock of incuriosity” exposed in the comments of several members.’<sup>8</sup>

For the record our motion to establish a Diet and Disease Action Committee was overwhelmingly defeated, receiving just five votes. The motion seeking cessation of AVA financial arrangements with pet food companies gained nine votes. For the AVA and the pet food companies it was back to business as usual. In a media release intended for communication to the general public, the AVA ‘refuted media reports condemning pet foods’. Seven months later, when the Diet and Disease issue was safely out of the public spotlight, an article in *AVA News* stated:

### **DIET VITAL, SAYS REVIEW**

There is ‘reasonable evidence’ that soft diets are associated with increased frequency and severity of periodontal disease in dogs and cats, according to a new report published in the October issue of the *Australian Veterinary Journal*.<sup>9</sup>

