The Evidence Failed and the Campaign Continued

Mars Hired Authority and the Corruption of Scientific Feedback

For decades Mars funded and amplified claims that pet ownership improved human health and saved public money. When stronger evidence failed to confirm those claims, no equivalent correction campaign followed. The science changed. The sales supporting message did not.

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The charge

This was not an innocent failure to know. It was a sustained failure to correct. Mars built and financed an apparently independent information service; favourable propositions were converted into publicity, policy and education; contrary evidence arrived; yet the public record was not corrected with anything like the force used to create it.

The incriminating pattern

The scandal is no longer that the truth was unavailable. The scandal is that corrective evidence arrived, was acknowledged and still failed to stop the campaign.

Mars had a direct commercial interest in preserving high levels of pet ownership. In Australia its subsidiary Uncle Ben's established the Petcare Information and Advisory Service in 1966. Contemporary trade reporting, reproduced in Raw Meaty Bones, put Petcare's annual cost at about $300,000 in 1991 and described it as managed by International Public Relations. That was separate from an estimated $4 million annual television budget for the PAL brand alone. Petcare ran school and council programmes, pet shows and advice services. The commercial logic was simple. More pets meant more feeding occasions; with Mars controlling a reported 65 per cent of the Australian pet food market, much of the resulting expenditure would flow back to Mars.

Petcare later presented itself as PIAS, the Pet Care Information and Advisory Service. The neutral sounding name concealed the interested sponsor. PIAS could speak about public health, social policy, children, cities, dog control and the human animal bond without sounding like a pet food manufacturer. That separation was not incidental. It was the device.

The science supplied the costume. Commerce supplied the motive. Public institutions supplied the reach.

From tentative finding to commercial truth

In 1992 Warwick Anderson, Christopher Reid and Garry Jennings reported cardiovascular measurements from 5,741 people who had attended a free screening clinic. Only 784 were pet owners. Some measured risk factors were lower among those owners. The authors' actual conclusion was cautious: the possibility that pet ownership reduced cardiovascular risk factors should be investigated.

That was a hypothesis generating result from a self selected clinic population. It was not proof that acquiring a pet caused better health. It was certainly not proof that pet ownership saved Medicare hundreds of millions of dollars.

By 1995, however, Anderson and social scientist Bruce Headey had produced Health cost savings: the impact of pets on Australian health budgets for PIAS. In 1996 Anderson used the Medical Journal of Australia to promote the proposition that pets probably conferred health benefits and that lower doctor visits and cardiovascular medication could save between $800 million and $1.5 billion. The supporting National People and Pets Survey was a telephone poll of 1,011 people conducted for the Urban Animal Management Coalition, to which major pet food companies and industry organisations contributed.

PIAS then moved the claim out of the research setting. Raw Meaty Bones records glossy copies of the New Scientist cover story Secret power of pets being sent to health professionals as supposedly accurate and reliable information. Doctors, health workers and policy makers were urged to treat companion animals as a matter of social health. Anderson appeared with PIAS veterinarian Jonica Newby in a television community service announcement promoting pet ownership. Newby carried the claimed savings into an ABC published book and told readers that keeping pets might be essential for health.

A cautious association had become a public prescription. A commercial sponsor had become a public interest educator. A possible effect had become an enormous saving to the taxpayer.

What the evidence actually did

Date	Documented event	Why it matters
1992	A clinic sample found associations and called for investigation.	The paper did not establish causation or national savings.
1995	Headey and Anderson produced a health cost report for PIAS.	The corporate information service now possessed a monetised public benefit claim.
1996	The claim entered the MJA and the public campaign, including an estimate of $800 million to $1.5 billion in savings.	A tentative finding was converted into authority useful to the pet market.
1997	Jorm and colleagues found elderly pet owners no healthier and no lower users of health services.	A direct test failed to support the promoted saving.
2001	Raw Meaty Bones documented the PIAS funding, publicity and contrary results.	The conflict and failure of correction were placed on public notice.
2003	A random electoral roll sample of 5,079 found no cardiovascular benefit; owners had higher diastolic pressure, BMI and smoking prevalence.	A much more representative sample contradicted the celebrated cardiovascular narrative.
2003	Headey answered in an MJA editorial that pets probably conferred benefits. He disclosed that he had been a paid PIAS consultant.	The adverse result was acknowledged, but the favourable proposition was retained.

Date	Documented event	Why it matters
2005	A study of 2,551 Australians aged 60 to 64 found no health benefit and several poorer outcomes among owners.	Another substantial result failed to restore negative feedback to the public campaign.

The 2003 study by Ruth Parslow and Anthony Jorm was not a minor technical objection. Its participants were randomly drawn from the electoral roll. Pet ownership was close to the national rate. The authors specifically tested the earlier cardiovascular claim and found no evidence of benefit. They also explained why the 1992 clinic sample was likely unrepresentative.

In the same issue, Headey called the new survey high quality and admitted that it found no lower blood pressure among owners. He nevertheless maintained that pets probably conferred health benefits. His published competing interest is crucial: he had acted as a paid consultant to PIAS, funded by Uncle Ben's.

The 2005 study added 2,551 older Australians. Caring for a pet was associated with more depressive symptoms, poorer physical health in some groups and greater use of pain medication; there was no difference in general practitioner visits. Because the study was cross sectional it did not prove pets caused those outcomes. But it did something decisive for the public claim: it supplied no support for the promised health dividend.

This is how scientific correction is meant to work. Early results generate a proposition. Better designed studies test it. Claims are then narrowed, withdrawn or restated with proper uncertainty. PIAS operated the first half of that process magnificently. The second half is missing.

Academic authority for sale

There is an ugly but familiar transaction in modern research. Corporations purchase access to academic labour and prestige. Academics obtain funds, platforms and influence. The resulting claims reach the public wrapped in university, journal and government authority. Industry partnership is the polite description. Where commercially useful advocacy survives substantial contradictory evidence, a harsher conclusion is justified: academic authority has been put up for sale.

Headey's financial relationship is documented in his own disclosure. Anderson's relationship must be stated more carefully. The available record shows that he co authored a PIAS report, promoted the health and savings proposition, appeared with a PIAS representative in a community service announcement and later occupied extremely influential NHMRC positions. It does not, on the evidence presently available, establish that Mars paid him personally. That distinction matters. The incriminating issue is not a guessed payment. It is the documented conversion of his scientific and institutional authority into material of immense commercial value, followed by no visible correction of comparable reach when the case weakened.

Anderson chaired the NHMRC Research Committee from 1997 to 2003 and later served as the NHMRC's inaugural chief executive from 2006 to 2015. Those offices magnify the public interest. A senior custodian of research standards should have been especially alert to selection bias, sponsor interest, the difference between association and causation, and the duty to correct claims that had escaped into public policy.

The point is not that academics may never work with industry. The point is that corporate sponsorship cannot suspend the ordinary duties of disclosure, scepticism and correction. Academic freedom does not include freedom to lend public authority to private commerce and then leave the public with the sales friendly version after the evidence changes.

PIAS was a system not a pamphlet

The health claim did not stand alone. Raw Meaty Bones, Multi Billion Dollar Pet Food Fraud and Spin Doctors together describe the wider PIAS machinery.

- **Market creation** Petcare was founded to encourage pet ownership and prepared pet food use while Mars already held the dominant market share.

- **Childhood conditioning** PIAS school kits recommended canned or dry commercial food as the best or safest diet. PetPEP, developed with PIAS funding and adopted by the Australian Veterinary Association, carried the programme across primary school years.
- **Behavioural research** The recovered PetNet record includes the Mackay and Roy Morgan programme, which examined attitudes, aspirations and the meanings attached to pets. This supplied the emotional map; health economics supplied a respectable public rationale.
- **Institutional capture** Councils, schools, veterinary bodies, welfare organisations and government figures supplied access and implied approval. Their names made commercial persuasion look like community consensus.
- **Media laundering** Newby's PIAS role was not disclosed to ABC audiences when she was introduced simply as a Melbourne veterinarian. ABC radio and television then carried programmes and books favourable to pet ownership.
- **Risk management** Dog bites, unwanted animals, wildlife predation, nuisance, cost and diet induced disease were treated as manageable side issues. The central commercial instruction remained intact: acquire the pet, feed the formula and consult the approved experts.
- **Resistance to dissent** Raw Meaty Bones records Mars complaints, demands to prevent further publicity and avoidance of open debate. Spin Doctors documents the later public relations response: Mars rejected the allegations while the professional and media structure largely stayed in place.
- **Vanishing accountability** PIAS later ceased operating and its public website disappeared. Billions of impressions and decades of advice were not accompanied by a permanent, indexed archive of contracts, data, corrections and sponsor relationships.

> **Once a proposition survives its own refutation, it is no longer functioning as a scientific proposition. It is serving an institution.**

The three books put Mars on notice

Raw Meaty Bones was published in 2001. Pages 223 to 226 set out the health claim, the PIAS funding, the Anderson and Newby promotion, Jorm's contrary findings and the absence of the advertised savings. Pages 252 to 258 set out the commercial structure: Petcare's budget, its use of schools and councils, Selectapet, the dietary instructions to children, the ABC programmes and the deliberate concealment of the Mars connection from ordinary audiences. Pages 263 and 264 explain how pet ownership was sold as a universal fantasy while unwanted animals, cruelty and other costs were shifted onto families, councils and welfare bodies.

Multi Billion Dollar Pet Food Fraud preserves the same contemporary warnings and extends them. At pages 184 to 186 it reproduces the 1996 and 1997 public objections to the undisclosed PIAS and ABC relationship and to PIAS and PetPEP programming in schools. At pages 219 and 220 it records the ABC's continued platforming of Newby and the questions the broadcaster declined to answer. It shows that the conflict was neither discovered late nor reconstructed with hindsight. The warning was specific, public and repeatedly delivered.

Spin Doctors records what happened after Raw Meaty Bones was launched. It documents media stories cancelled or sanitised, Mars refusing a substantive public encounter, the company saying there was absolutely no scientific or other basis for the allegations, and the trade and professional structure continuing to promote processed products. It also places the PIAS episode in the wider pattern of veterinary sponsorship, dental product marketing and institutional silence.

These books are not merely commentary on an old controversy. They are dated evidence of notice. Mars, the AVA, the ABC, universities and regulators cannot plausibly say that nobody raised the problem. They were told. Documents were supplied. Results were published. The structure continued.

What may properly be inferred

The documented facts do not by themselves prove a criminal conspiracy. They do support a strong inference of bad faith conduct.

Mars had motive. More pets and habitual reliance on packaged pet food enlarged its market. Mars had means. PIAS possessed public relations professionals, research sponsorship, school access, media relationships, databases and institutional partners. Mars had knowledge. It funded the information service, commissioned or disseminated the research and employed the personnel carrying the message. Mars also had notice of the contrary case through peer reviewed papers, public controversy, Raw Meaty Bones and direct correspondence.

What is missing is the conduct expected of a good faith public educator: a prominent correction of the Medicare savings claim; reissued advice to every doctor, policy maker, school, council and journalist who received the favourable material; a review of teaching programmes; publication of research contracts and data; and a permanent archive showing what was said, what changed and why.

Instead the favourable message travelled outward while the correction remained confined to journals and critics. Benefits were privatised. Harms and costs were socialised. The sponsor eventually disappeared from view, leaving the culture it had helped construct to reproduce itself through vets, schools, media, councils and families.

That is the incriminating pattern. It is not a single false sentence. It is a system designed to make commercial persuasion look like independent knowledge, and a system that lacked the negative feedback necessary to correct itself.

The questions Mars and its partners must answer

1. What did Mars, Uncle Ben's, PIAS, Warwick Anderson, Bruce Headey, the AVA, the ABC and the NHMRC know about the contrary studies, and when did each know it?
2. Which PIAS claims, cost saving estimates, school materials, media packages and policy submissions were corrected or withdrawn after the 1997, 2003 and 2005 findings?
3. What payments, contracts, briefs, correspondence, datasets and publication plans governed the Anderson and Headey work and the wider PIAS research programme?
4. Who approved the television community service announcements, ABC programmes and distribution of Secret power of pets, and what conflict disclosures were made?
5. Where are the complete PIAS and PetNet records now, including the Mackay and Roy Morgan research, school programme files, media distribution lists, evaluations and correspondence?
6. Who took custody of the files and intellectual property when the PIAS company's ABN was cancelled in November 2017?

The conclusion

Mars did not need every pet owner to buy a particular can on a particular day. It needed society to accept a prior proposition: pet ownership is responsible, normal and beneficial; manufactured food is the sensible means of feeding; and vets and approved experts will manage the consequences. PIAS helped build that reality.

The Anderson and Headey episode exposes the method. Corporate interest commissioned and distributed a reassuring story. Academic and institutional authority made it credible. Media and public bodies multiplied its reach. When the evidence ceased to cooperate, the story was protected from the consequences.

No honest scientific enterprise is entitled to keep the authority gained from favourable findings while discarding the obligation created by adverse ones. Mars and every institution that carried the PIAS message owe the public more than silence. They owe the complete record, the complete money trail and a correction as prominent as the campaign itself.

Read and preserve the record

- The recovered PIAS PetNet archive
- Raw Meaty Bones
- Multi Billion Dollar Pet Food Fraud
- Spin Doctors
- Mars and the Industrial Pet Food Experiment

Sources and evidentiary notes

1. Raw Meaty Bones Promote Health. Tom Lonsdale, 2001, especially pp 223–226, 252–258 and 263–264. Primary source for the author's contemporary record and reproduced PIAS material.
2. Multi Billion Dollar Pet Food Fraud. Tom Lonsdale, 2023, especially pp 155, 184–186 and 219–220. Reproduces dated campaign documents and later institutional responses.
3. Spin Doctors. Tom Lonsdale, especially pp 18–23 and the 2001–2002 Mars responses. Documentary campaign chronicle.
4. Anderson Reid and Jennings 1992. Pet ownership and risk factors for cardiovascular disease, Medical Journal of Australia 157, 298–301. Peer reviewed study; clinic sample; cautious conclusion.
5. Anderson 1996. The benefits of pet ownership, Medical Journal of Australia 164, 441–442. Its references identify the 1995 Headey and Anderson report published by PIAS.
6. Parslow and Jorm 2003. Pet ownership and risk factors for cardiovascular disease another look, Medical Journal of Australia 179, 466–468. Random electoral roll sample of 5,079; no cardiovascular benefit.
7. Headey 2003. Pet ownership good for health, Medical Journal of Australia 179, 460–461. Editorial acknowledges the contrary study and discloses paid PIAS consultancy.
8. Parslow Jorm Christensen Rodgers and Jacomb 2005. Pet ownership and health in older adults, Gerontology 51, 40–47. Cross sectional study of 2,551 Australians aged 60–64.
9. AVA Annual Report 2000. Institutional record of PIAS funding and the scale and objectives of PetPEP. Primary institutional source.
10. ABN Lookup. Petcare Information and Advisory Service Australia Pty Ltd, ABN 85 085 490 857, cancelled 6 November 2017. Administrative status only; ABN cancellation does not itself prove liquidation.

Evidentiary caution This article distinguishes documented relationships from inference. It does not allege that every PIAS supported study was fabricated, nor that Warwick Anderson personally received Mars money. Its allegation is narrower and evidence based: a corporation with a direct market interest built a system that commissioned, credentialed and amplified favourable propositions without a visible correction mechanism of comparable power when substantial contrary evidence emerged.