

From *Animal Issues*, Volume 29, Number 4, Winter 1998

## Veterinarians: What They Think About Pet Food

By Dena Jones

What do veterinarians think about commercial pet food and its impact on companion animal health?

Last spring API and the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (AVAR) developed a survey to answer that question. Written with the assistance of API program consultant Elizabeth Colleran, D.V.M., M.S., the questionnaire was mailed to all AVAR veterinarian and veterinary student members.

Most of the veterinarians who responded share API's concerns about the quality of commercial pet food and its influence on companion animal health.

### Cause of Disease

Respondents to the survey rated **nutrition** as having a moderate to strong influence on a number of health problems in dogs and cats. Those companion animal health problems seen as being most influenced by nutrition included:

- obesity
- inflammatory bowel disease
- dental disease
- diabetes mellitus
- chronic renal failure.

Developmental bone disease in dogs and lower urinary tract disease in cats were also seen as being strongly influenced by nutrition.

"Clinical experience tells me many medical problems are *caused* by commercial diets," offered one vet. Another commented, "I believe that the incredibly poor quality of commercial pet foods is largely responsible for the continued increase in chronic, degenerative diseases in dogs and cats."

As a part of therapy in all the above conditions, the veterinarians overwhelmingly said they include nutritional changes. Nearly 80% of the respondents said they also advise their clients about feeding healthy animals.

### Concern for Quality

When asked whether they believe a qualitative difference exists among commercial pet food brands, 65% of the respondents answered "definitely yes" and another 29% said "probably yes." The veterinarians indicated that they recommend commercial brands to their clients based on quality of ingredients, their clinical experience, availability,

palatability, cost, company technical support, and feeding trials and research.

More than 90% of veterinarians responding to the survey said that they have concerns about pet food.

"Ingredients not fit for human consumption -- how can these be good for our pets?" asked one veterinarian. Another commented: "Garbage in, garbage out. Can you get adequate nutrition from a *bag*?? I don't think so, animals need whole foods."

An interest in fresh, whole foods was echoed by a number of veterinarians. More than three-quarters of the respondents said they "frequently" or "occasionally" recommend home-cooking in the treatment of health problems. Fewer did so for healthy animals.

While a few veterinarians expressed concerns about their clients' ability to provide proper nutrition through homemade food, others gave companion animal caregivers more credit. "The grassroots movement to fresh, whole foods has been growing for many years, and as always the veterinarians are the *last* to catch on. We should be embarrassed that our clients know more about nutrition than we do!" lamented one respondent.

### **More Information Needed**

Greater than two-thirds of the vets said they didn't think pet food companies provide adequate information about their products. Many admitted to being confused by the number of commercial products available and the manufacturers' claims.

"Having read multiple veterinary articles on nutrition and realizing there is almost no way to 'comparison shop' different brands as to quality, efficacy, etc., my greatest concern is that neither a veterinarian nor a layman can make informed qualitative choices," noted one vet.

"It is as hard to get accurate info about pet foods as it is about human foods because of the less-than-honest advertising and claims -- and because most info is published by the producer," observed another.

The survey respondents said they wanted standardized labeling and more information about meat and grain quality and source, digestibility, nutritional profile, by-product source, preservatives, and feeding recommendations.

API expects that demands from veterinarians and the public will pressure commercial pet food companies to disclose more of this information, eventually resulting in better quality food for our animal companions.

A number of survey respondents were in accord with this goal, such as the veterinarian who said, "I think it is long overdue that pet food companies are investigated for the ingredients placed in today's pet foods. Most consumers are not aware of what goes into their pet's food and I think it's about time they did. Good luck!" Another vet summarized the situation by concluding, "If the American public knew what went into their dog's and cat's commercial food, you'd see some major changes in purchasing choices."

Printed copies of API's "[What's Really in Pet Food](#)" Investigative Report and/or the [complete survey results](#) are available by writing or calling API.

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### **The Most Frequently Cited Concerns**

- Poor quality of meats/fats/grains (42%)
- Preservatives (18%)
- Other additives (18%)
- Misleading claims (13%)
- Source of protein (diseased, downed, dying, dead animals) (11%)
- By-products (rendered roadkill, euthanized pets) (11%)
- Inadequate labeling (9%)
- Over-processing (8%)
- Contaminants (6%)
- Inconsistent ingredients (5%)
- Excess protein and fat (5%)