

Pet-Food Labels Baffle Consumers

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meat at a slaughterhouse before opening a private practice. Part of his job was to reject for human consumption so-called 4D tissue — meat that came from animals that were dead, dying, diseased or disabled before they reached the packing plant.

"This would go in a tank and then was taken to a rendering plant and made into meat and bone meal, that is the main ingredient of dry dog food," Belfield said. "Fed this cotton-picking diet every day, this will in time have a deleterious effect on the dog," Belfield claimed.

Government health officials, scientists and pet-food industry executives say such criticism is unfounded.

"Any products not fit for human consumption are very well sterilized, so nothing can be transferred to the animal," said James Morris, a professor in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California at Davis and one of the country's leading experts on cat nutrition. "And to say products are unwholesome because we Americans don't like to eat them is not correct. There's nothing wrong with eating spleen, which we don't do but some Arabs eat."

Charles Weil, vice president of the Friskies PetCare Division of Carnation Co., believes it makes little sense to put the high-priced human-grade meat products into pet food.

"But what we use is very nutritious and a good source of protein," he said.

Causing Diseases

Yet a growing group of veterinarians and specialty pet-food manufacturers challenge such prevailing opinions. They base their conclusions on years of working with pets.

"In many instances you are

HOW TO READ A PET-FOOD LABEL

Definitions of frequently used ingredients in dog and cat food:

■ **Fish by-products** must consist of nonrendered, clean, undecomposed portions of fish (such as, but not limited to, heads, fins, tails, ends, skin, bone and viscera) which result from the fish-processing industry.

■ **Meat and bone meal** is the rendered product from mammal tissues, including bone, exclusive of blood, hair, hoof, horn, hide trimmings, manure, stomach and rumen contents, except in such amounts as may occur unavoidably in good processing practices.

■ **Meat by-products** is the nonren-

Source: Association of American Feed Control Officials

dered, clean parts, other than meat, derived from slaughtered animals. It includes, but is not limited to, lungs, spleen, kidneys, brain, livers, blood, bone, partially defatted low-temperature fatty tissue, and stomachs and intestines freed of their contents.

■ **Poultry by-products** must consist of nonrendered, clean parts of carcasses of slaughtered poultry such as heads, feet, viscera, free from fecal content and foreign matter except in trace amounts as might occur unavoidably in good factory practice.

causing diseases in animals if you feed off-the-shelf food," said Alfred Plechner, a West Los Angeles veterinarian who helped design an all-natural diet for a California pet-food company named Nature's Recipe.

Bob Goldstein, co-owner of a Connecticut pet-food company named Lick Your Chops, said his veterinary practice found that chemical additives and preservatives in mass-produced pet foods caused skin and kidney disorders, arthritis, hyperactivity, hair loss and other problems — many of which improved by eliminating foods with the additives.

"The bottom line is a lot of the animals get better just on the diet alone," said Richard Pitcairn, a Eugene, Ore., veterinarian who wrote the seminal book on natural pet foods in 1982.

Some vets express concerns about the concentration of lead in the bones of grass-fed cattle that routinely are processed into pet food. Others warn against the use of preservatives such as propylene glycol — a first cousin to antifreeze —

BHA, BHT and ethoxyquin.

"All that is anecdotal, there is no tested and tried information about additives. You need to do a double-blind study to confirm anything," countered Quintin Rogers, a professor in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California at Davis.

He said additives cause far fewer problems than pet owners who give their animals too many supplements such as calcium or vitamin D.

Nutritional Requirements

An expert in animal nutrition, Rogers was one of the committee members appointed by the National Academy of Science's National Research Council to develop minimum nutritional requirements for pets. Dog and cat foods that meet the 1985 guidelines can state on the label that the product provides a complete and balanced diet.

"But give me a tire, an old leather shoe and a quart of oil and I can meet all the national specifications for the NRC diet," said Jeff Bennett, president of Nature's Recipe.

That's because the standards only measure the content of such items as protein, but fail to reveal how much of that protein is digestible and available to the animal. Shoe leather and chicken feathers meet the protein standards, even though little would be absorbed by a dog or cat.

That bothered the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association enough to propose that they supervise independent testing of pet food.

"Our concern was their labels were not indicative of the bio-availability of the nutrients," said John Albers, executive director of the AAHA. "There is some doubt in our minds as to whether the labeling is sufficient, whether the claims that are on the label are backed up by adequate testing."

'Supermarket Syndrome'

Walter Martin Jr., chairman of the pet-food advisory committee and immediate past president of the AVMA, recalls a disease his colleagues called supermarket syndrome. Dogs were literally starving to death on a certain generic brand of pet food because it had so little digestible material, even though it met the minimum standards.

Another problem came from a well-known canned dog food that contained large chunks of heart artery. Although counted as protein under the old rules, the aorta is almost totally indigestible, Martin said.

But the two groups dropped plans for independent testing when the Association of American Feed Control Officials agreed to revise the standards for determining which pet foods may use the "complete and balanced" claim on their labels. The proposed policy calls for procedures to substantiate that a pet food not only contains the required nutrients, but that they are digestible by the animal.

Pet-Food Makers Introduce Upscale Products to Boost Profits

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getting the best food, too," Ovadia said.

Other manufacturers want to nudge consumers upscale to more expensive super-premium pet foods. Last month, for example, industry leader Ralston Purina Co. launched a new division designed to give a greater push to its specialty products.

Consumers seem receptive to

the marketing effort. As people become more health conscious and alter their own diets, they often change the food they give their pets.

Mike Milone, general manager of dog-food marketing at Heinz Pet Products, said super-premium products cost more than standard pet food because they provide higher quality.

"You might have chunks of

meat rather than mush, the smell has gotten better — both for the dog and the owner — and the packaging has gotten better," he said.

Yet many veterinarians question whether the additional price provides much additional value for the pet.

"Most pet-food companies have gourmet brands, usually with higher-quality ingredients and higher palatability, but that doesn't mean

they are any better," said Quintin Rogers, an animal nutritionist and professor of veterinary medicine at the University of California at Davis.

As long as the pet food meets the minimum standards set by the National Research Council, most veterinarians say it's perfectly acceptable. The super-premium brands cannot offer better nutrition, only higher digestibility — which means less feces.

"It might make a difference in terms of the cost and amount of kitty litter used, but the higher-price product doesn't mean you have any different nutrition," Rogers said.

Products labeled as pet health food occupy a small niche at the extreme upper end of the super-premium line. Many of these products use "food grade" raw ingredients, found in human food, rather than "feed grade" materials used

exclusively in animal food. These foods account for about \$100 million of total sales, but seem poised for growth.

"It's a trend," said Susan Stein, president of Lick Your Food, a South Norwalk, Conn., company with sales of about \$4 million. "It mirrors what has happened in the human health food industry, become a major factor and big manufacturers will jump