

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

AN ARTICLE ABOUT WHAT IS REALLY IN COMMERCIAL PET FOOD

By: [Marina Zacharias](#)

Whenever a problem is presented to a holistic Vet. usually one of the first questions asked is “What are you feeding him/her”. The subject of food, especially of “pet” food, is surrounded with controversy regarding which brand provides what; which is better brand x or brand xyz; so called “premium” brands and all the magical things it will do for your animal; the “mythical” all the nutrition in one bag your animal will ever need; and on and on and on!

Probably the most expensive single ingredient in the most popular pet foods, is the dollars spent on advertising the product. How then, do we go about choosing what diet will provide the best health-or at least do the minimum amount of harm-for our animals? A truly INFORMED decision can only be made by cutting through all the “hoopla” and red herrings tossed out by the advertising boys and finding out for yourself just what is really going on. I know I am probably going to step on a lot of peoples toes on this subject but I’m willing to take the flack if it stimulates you to “think for yourself” about this most basic of issues. If you don’t think the following applies to your pet food--THINK AGAIN !!

Lets start by considering ingredients, move on to how they are processed, stored and eventually used. When I was still using a “commercial” food I was naive enough to read the label and thought I understood the first few ingredients and a few of the additives, then my eye sort of skipped over the unpronounceable “---ites, ...ates, etc.” I thought these were just fancy names for various minerals, vitamins and so on. Boy was I wrong! For those of you with a weak stomach I would suggest you skip the rest of this article. Most of us are aware (although we choose not to think about it) that the primary source of “meat” in all pet foods, is derived from diseased, dead, or deformed animals. Anything not “fit” for human consumption is considered O.K. for “pet” consumption.

For example the National Animal Control Association has estimated that animal shelters kill over 13 million household pets a year. Of this total, 30% are buried, 30% are cremated and the remaining 40%, about 5 million pets, are shipped to rendering factories to be recycled and used in pet food. This may make sense as a scientific “protein source”, but emotionally I am disgusted to think of Dogs being used as “Dog Food”--all for the sake of economic raw material. But what about the injections of sodium pentobarbital used to put pets to sleep you might ask? Or the cancerous tumors and other organs of diseased animals? No problem, says the FDA, such residue would be to small to cause a problem.

Why then did the University of Nebraska researchers confirm the death of an 11-month-old girl from an adverse reaction to penicillin contained in dry cat food she had eaten? The Nebraska investigators noted in “The American Journal of Cardiology” that the penicillin level in the cat food was 600 times higher than USDA limit for human food. If you were to question the manufacturer on any of this you would no doubt get an outright denial BUT consider that for dry foods “meat” must be reduced to a dry powder in order to be processed through the giant machines used in the manufacturing process.

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This type of material, originates in a “rendering” plant, that converts carcasses to powder by the truckload. (Incidentally, they don’t waste much in this process--I leave it to your imagination to visualize what all is utilized). The larger the manufacturer, the less chance they have of knowing what the source of their “meat” powder actually was. The truth is, they don’t want to know! There is no way they would dare “advertise” the facts behind the label.

Lamb & Rice? Sounds yummy but the same process is being used! Just because it comes from New Zealand does not mean that little elves down there cut up all this meat into fresh little chunks that make up a “Premium” pet food. No dear friends, both Australia and New Zealand had a “glut” of this particular animal and couldn’t get rid of it for human consumption on the world markets. Presto Changeo--”Lets make it into a pet food and charge more for it” (same old song and dance from the back room advertising boys). I don’t really have room here to get into the excessive levels of heavy-metal contaminants(i.e. cadmium, Mercury, etc.) commonly found in pet foods. Suffice to say that they are FAR higher than the maximum that would ever be allowed for humans! Is it any wonder that the incidence of epileptic seizures in dogs has risen to alarming numbers?

Try to remember when you read a label, the mind automatically pictures the meat (be it beef, lamb, chicken or whatever) in its’ “raw” form as we normally see it at the grocery store. The advertising boys take this natural tendency and try to enforce it and enhance it with wonderful images of gourmet chefs carefully selecting and preparing your pets next feast. Nothing could be further from the truth! Make an effort to break this conditioning and picture a powder in its place. Some companies are still truthful enough to label the meat as “desiccated”--meaning dry, dry, dry. So lets see.. we start with diseased meat, convert it to a form we can legally use, now what other “goodies” can we get that are cheap, cheap, cheap. Livestock-grade grain is usually the main ingredient used. This is not because dogs and cats require large amounts of carbohydrates, but because grains are about as cheap a food as can be found. However, a still cheaper ingredient is the “waste” dust, floor sweepings, husks, the rejects from the screening process for flour, etc. Ideal for our favorite yummy pet food. But we can’t call it scrap can we--nobody would buy it! So lets call it “middlings”--nobody will catch on then! (While we are at it lets call the ground up bones, fish heads and other good stuff like feet, feathers --”poultry meal, fish meal, etc.”--that sound a lot better than scrap!) No need to mention that livestock grade really means we don’t have to concern ourselves with “allowable” levels of pesticide residue left in the grains.

What else can we get that is “waste”, sounds good and of course is cheap, cheap, cheap. I know! Lets throw in some Brewers Yeast--(see our previous newsletter for this stuff). Even many of the “upscale” brands have jumped on this bandwagon! Are you beginning to get the idea yet? So far we have only talked about the main ingredients. What about all those other long names on the label? Most are added in minute quantities in an attempt to formulate the so called “balanced” diet.

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What these “balanced diets” choose to ignore is that not all breeds are the same! Take Phosphate balance as an example. Without enough phosphate there is abnormal gland (parathyroid) function, bone metabolism, intestinal absorption, malnutrition and kidney malfunction. Too much phosphate can cause kidney damage and may affect the absorption of other minerals, causing imbalances of nutritional elements. Combine this with the fact that toy breeds absorb more calories per pound of body weight than giant breeds and ask yourself--how do you know if you're getting enough, too much or just the right “balance” for your dog. In natural foods (raw), Mother Nature does the balancing for us and the body takes what it needs. When artificially added--who knows what is absorbed?

With very few exceptions, the ...ates, ...ites, ...ides, etc. are synthetic forms of vitamins and minerals (cheap) which may or may not be effectively absorbed by a dog or cat. There are a few ingredients however that are banned by the FDA for human consumption but O.K. for pet foods. An example of this would be any of the Cobalt salts used as additives. (Again look at Cobalt Carbonate commonly used in the “upscale” brands). If you truly are interested in deciphering the ingredient label, a handy reference source is a book titled “A Consumers Dictionary of Food Additives” by Ruth Winter, published by Crown Publishers in New York. We are all aware of the problems created by BHA, Ethoxyquin, and BHT preservatives but you may want to try and understand the other “goodies” added to your pet food.

O.K. we've gathered all our raw materials, now how do we stick them all together to make a dry food that has nice little shapes and at least looks like it's good to eat. Obviously we need a method that is cheap, cheap, cheap. Enter the mass production geniuses and design equipment capable of churning out TONS of finished product every HOUR. Unless you have seen this equipment with your own eyes it is hard to visualize how big these “extruders” are and how fast they work. Imagine if you will, a single machine pushing out enough “food” to fill a 40 lb. bag in about the same time it takes to blink your eyes. Believe me people, the only way these monsters can run with such efficiency is to make sure the “form” of raw material suites THE MACHINE. You don't change the machine to suit the material--you change the material to suite the machine. Everything must start out dry, dry, dry! Then its “cooked” with live steam, rammed through tiny holes for the fancy “shape” desired (under tons of pressure), hurried through high temperature drying ovens (to get rid of the moisture from the steam), and hustled through the automatic bagging procedure. What chance does a digestive enzyme have of surviving this treatment? None!

Various size runs of various size bags are made and the finished product is palletized for shipment in truckload or railcar quantities to major warehouse distribution centers. Depending on demand, it may take anywhere from just a few weeks to upwards of several months before the product finally reaches the store shelves. But that's not the end of it. Every place where this is stored is subject to insect infestations. To prevent the public from ever seeing these creepy little crawlers, sooner

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or later these warehouses must use a chemical insecticide spray to destroy and further deter these "protein" lovers.

Even major Grocery chains are well aware that they must periodically "bomb" these little suckers to get rid of them. They don't talk about it, but it is common knowledge throughout the industry. In warmer regions pesticides are routinely used every week not only on pet "food" but also on biscuits, treats etc. If you happen to get a bag that somehow has slipped through the spraying and still has live worms crawling in it, consider yourself lucky. This could be the most nutritious protein you will find in the food! Finally you get your hands on this "fresh" bag of goodies and because it is "convenient" to use and probably well advertised as a "nutritious" food--you foist it off on your animal. The fact that he survives on it is no credit to the manufacturer or to you. Rather credit must be given to the magnificent digestive system of your animal to be able to consume this stuff and still get something out of it.

When it comes to choosing the "least worst" its a case of "Let the buyer beware". If you insist on retaining the "convenience" over health factor, and want to keep using your dry food, at least add a digestive enzyme to give your pet a break on his already overtaxed system. Adding some fresh vegetables and fruits would also help a lot. Even if these too have been subjected to pesticides, at least they are still raw and have more to contribute to nourishment than the highly processed contents in commercial pet foods! (More on natural diets in future issues.) At the beginning of this century, pets were fed on "scraps" from our own food. Around the middle of this century, the fast-food lifestyle started to make its appearance. As we approach the end of this century "scraps" have taken on a whole new meaning. I would challenge every national breed club to do a simple survey of the average life span of their breed in 1900, 1950, and now! Has it decreased? Does this correlate with the food we are feeding to our animals? Have health problems in general increased? As we move into the 21st century, maybe its time we turned the clock back a hundred years and got back to some basic nutrition!

PART II

It's been a little over two years since we published our ["Food For Thought" article](#) (Volume 1-Issue2: January 1995). This very brief outline of some of the problems with commercial pet food was intended to give you a few good reasons to strongly consider feeding your pet a raw diet rather than the goop passed off as "food" by the big boys. The time has come to provide you with a little more detailed information that may help you to make an informed decision with respect to the "convenience" of commercial food versus the "work" involved in preparing your own food. Caution: If you have a weak stomach, skip this article!

IT'S IN THE BAG

Obviously there are millions and millions of pounds of pet food sold in bags and cans every year. Did you ever wonder where they get their "meat" and "fat" from? Do you really think they have their own ranches or farms to raise their own raw material? Of

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course not! They look to the many rendering plants across the nation to provide them with the tonnage they require on a regular basis.

In the previous article, we did mention the quantity of pets shipped to rendering factories to be recycled and used in pet food. However, I left to your imagination to visualize what goes on in a rendering facility. Let me provide you with a few details to assist the imagery! Firstly, let me say that I am glad that these facilities do exist. Without them our cities would run the risk of becoming filled with diseased and rotting carcasses. It is a dirty job that someone has to do. Before World War II, most slaughter houses looked after their own rendering. After the war, the rendering of slaughter waste became a separate specialty. Consequently the rendering plants were no longer subject to most of the federal inspection regulations associated with meat processing. Thus today, we find that the industry is largely self regulated and out of the "public eye".

To even begin to understand this industry we must first look at the "raw material" as it is received at the plant. The slaughterhouse for animal carcasses is one of the main suppliers of material to the rendering industry. To prevent condemned meat from being rerouted and used for human consumption, government regulations require that the meat be "denatured" before being sent to the rendering plants. Nice word, but what does that mean? Basically it means that first it must be contaminated in some way that would make it virtually unusable for human consumption. Some of the materials used to accomplish this task are: carbolic acid, creosote, fuel oil, kerosene, citronella, etc. Once this stuff has literally soaked into the meat, it's then fit to be sent on to the rendering plant.

Another prime source of raw material is the veterinary community. Not only are dogs and cats received in nice little green plastic bags, but also raccoons, possums, deer, foxes, snakes, etc., etc. Of course we can't forget the grocery industry, that must somehow get rid of the spoiled meat cuts that are no longer saleable and the fat, bones, etc. that we (at home) would consider garbage. So inside the rendering plants we find the floor piled high with "raw product" consisting of a mixture of whole bodies and animal parts, plastic bags, Styrofoam packages, metal tags, pet collars-anything and everything that is considered to be "waste"-but suitable for recycling.

"Rendering" is the process of cooking raw animal material to remove the moisture and fat. Let's take a closer look at how this is actually done. Inside the plant we find masked men (because of the stench of rotting carcasses) operating mini-bulldozers, loading the "raw" material into a 10-foot deep stainless steel pit. At the bottom of the pit, a giant auger-grinder begins to turn. This converts the mass material into smaller, more manageable chunks. From there it is transported to another auger for fine shredding. Now you have to realize that this is a business and like any other business, they have to cut costs wherever possible. Consequently, they do not bother to take the time to remove the flea collars from pets, the pesticide ear tags from cattle, the plastic bags, Styrofoam packaging, etc, etc. All is grist for the grinder. Just push it in with the bulldozer.

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This mass of goop is then cooked at 280 degrees for one hour. During the cooking process the goop produces a layer of yellow grease or tallow that rises to the top and is skimmed off. The cooked meat and bone (along with whatever metal, pesticides, etc.) are sent to a hammermill press, which squeezes out the remaining moisture and pulverizes the product into a gritty powder. Once the batch is finished, all that is left is yellow grease, "meat" and bone meal. This continuous batch cooking process goes on non-stop, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, grinding out ton after ton of saleable product. Depending on the dominant ingredient of a particular run, the product now becomes: beef, chicken, lamb, meat meal, meat by products, poultry meal, fish meal, fish oil, yellow grease, tallow, beef fat, chicken fat, etc. Never is it labeled dog meal, cat meal, skunk meal, rat meal, or any of the other "goodies" that get mixed in with the everyday batches of "raw material".

Although this processing effectively kills off any beneficial enzymes, it does not get rid of the sodium Phenobarbital in the carcasses of euthanized animals. The potential of other chemical contaminants to be degraded by the rendering process is also highly questionable. Perhaps instead of calling them rendering plants it would be more appropriate to call them "toxic waste" recycling plants. Need we say who are some of the biggest customers of the finished product? You got it - the pet food companies. The primary source of meat and fat in commercial pet food is from this endless process of rendering plants. The scary part is that millions of tons of this "food enhancer" is also trucked to poultry ranches, cattle feed lots, dairy and hog farms, fish feed plants, etc. where is it mixed with other ingredients to feed animals and fish that humans will eat. By the time the pet food boys get through adding their own "enhancers" (i.e. preservatives, food dye, synthetic vitamins) who really knows what's in the bag?

One of the most common problems I hear about is food allergies. Breeders switch from one brand to another, from beef to lamb, from grain to rice, etc. and find themselves frustrated at not being able to solve the problem. Things may seem to go well for a time and then the same old thing happens all over again. Changing to lamb from beef would appear to be a logical thing to try, but how on earth do you really know just what you are really getting? Let me give you a hypothetical example of what could be in a run of "lamb" from the rendering plant and still legally be labeled as lamb. If we were to bulldoze into the pit, say 25% of lamb parts, mix with 20% beef, 20% chicken, say 15% dogs or cats, and say a mixture of 20% of various road kill animal carcasses, we can say that the dominant ingredient of this run is lamb. (For this example we will ignore the % of plastic, metal, Styrofoam, insecticide, etc. - all too small to affect the labeling process).

As long as the rendering plant does not misrepresent the % of protein or fat or calcium, etc, they are legitimately entitled to sell the run to your favorite pet food manufacturer as "lamb". By the way, I should mention that the fat sold by the rendering industry does not all come from animals. Thanks to the proliferation of fast food restaurants, nearly half of the "raw material" is waste kitchen grease and frying oil cleaned out of the traps on a

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regular basis (another industry all of its own). Again, the pet food people rely on this source for the fat that is usually sprayed on the kibble at the end of the drying process. Once you understand just what really goes into producing a commercial pet food, you can't really be surprised to learn that many of the health problems we see in our companion animals are directly attributable to a lack of proper nutrition.

When someone asks me "aren't you afraid of salmonella or contamination in the raw meat you use?", I only wish I could take them to a rendering facility and show them just how bad the commercial goop can be! Never again would they buy a bag or can of pet food without realizing just what they are really doing. Never again would they have any fear of using "fresh" meat in place of what the industry laughingly calls food for pets. You should have enough basic information to make a fundamental decision on the type of diet you choose to use for your animals. Let me repeat what I say in this article. As we move into the 21st century maybe it's time we turned the clock back a hundred years and get back to some basic nutrition.

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