



Ethical question of the month — March 2003

The feeding of raw meat and bone diets is being promoted by many people, including some veterinarians, with an almost evangelical zeal.

As a small animal practitioner, you have seen many dogs on these diets that appear to be in excellent general health. Also, you have had clients report that some chronic problems, such as allergic skin disease, have resolved since their pet has been on the diet.

Based on conventional standards of nutrition, you know that these diets are not balanced, especially for growing dogs. Also, the potential for zoonotic disease from the raw foods and for complications from ingesting bone is very real.

Although not convinced that these diets are appropriate pet foods, you have begun to wonder if some processed commercial diets are lacking nutritional factors that may be present in raw diets. You also question whether the large proportion of processed grain found in commercial diets is biologically appropriate for dogs and cats, which are basically carnivores.

Raw diets appear to be increasing in popularity; therefore, how should a veterinarian respond to questions regarding the appropriateness of these diets?

*Submitted by David Sandwith, MRCVS
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Question de déontologie du mois — mars 2003

Beaucoup de gens, y compris des vétérinaires, préconisent avec une ferveur quasi religieuse les régimes composés de viande crue et d'os.

En tant que praticien des petits animaux, vous avez examiné beaucoup de chiens soumis à ce genre de régime et qui semblaient en bonne santé. Vous avez aussi eu des clients qui vous ont signalé des problèmes chroniques, comme des dermatites d'origine allergique, qui ont été résolus depuis que leur animal reçoit ce type d'alimentation.

Selon les normes alimentaires traditionnelles, ces régimes ne sont pas équilibrés, surtout pour les chiots. En outre, le risque de transmission de zoonoses dans des aliments crus et de complications à la suite de l'ingestion d'os est très réel.

Bien que vous ne soyez pas convaincu que les régimes d'aliments crus répondent aux besoins des animaux de compagnie, vous commencez à vous demander si les aliments vendus dans le commerce ne sont pas dépourvus de certains éléments nutritifs présents dans les aliments crus. Vous doutez aussi que la quantité élevée de céréales dans les aliments du commerce convienne aux chiens et aux chats, qui sont des carnivores.

Les régimes de viande crue semblent gagner en popularité; par conséquent, comment le vétérinaire doit-il répondre aux questions à leur sujet?

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Comment

With regards to the query “how should a veterinarian respond to questions regarding the appropriateness of raw food diets,” it is my belief that we owe it to our clients and patients to make recommendations based (as much as possible) on the results of peer reviewed scientific study. Though, as veterinarians, we may never be able to approach the human “gold standard” of true evidence-based medicine, it behooves us to rely on scientific data as much as possible. Unfortunately, there is no peer reviewed scientific evidence to support the safety, nutritional adequacy, or the efficacy of feeding raw food diets. On the other hand, there is good scientific evidence that suggests that these diets are not balanced nutritionally (1) and are potentially dangerous to both the pets ingesting them and the humans who are in contact with the pets (2,3).

Given the documented presence in raw meat diets of many bacteria with known human and animal pathogenicity (*Salmonella* spp, *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, *Campylobacter* spp, *Yersinia enterocolitica*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *C. botulinum*,

Staphylococcus aureus, and *Bacillus cereus* [2,3]), veterinarians may be opening themselves up to liability issues should a pet or “in contact” human become sick from one of these organisms while the pet is being fed a “veterinary recommended” raw diet. In recommending these diets to pet owners, the veterinarian gives more weight to the anecdotal reports offered by proponents of the diets than to the available peer reviewed science. With the existing scientific evidence weighted against feeding raw food diets, I believe that, ethically, we must inform owners of these facts when answering the question of whether or not to feed these diets to their pets.

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1. Freeman L, Michel KE. Evaluation of raw food diets for dogs. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;218:705–709.
2. Lejune JT, Hancock DD. Public health concerns associated with feeding raw meat diets to dogs. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;219:1222–1225.
3. Joffe DJ, Schlesinger DP. Preliminary assessment of the risk of *Salmonella* infection in dogs fed raw chicken diets. *Can Vet J* 2002;43:441–442.