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Raw food policy draws debate

AVMA advises against feeding dogs, cats raw animal proteins

By Greg Cima



Photo by Greg Cima

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The AVMA now discourages people from feeding raw or unprocessed meat, eggs, and milk to cats and dogs. A policy approved in August by the AVMA House of Delegates states that feeding such foods to cats and dogs can sicken those pets as well as other animals and people exposed to them. It notes that infection risks are particularly high for children, elderly people, and those who have compromised immune systems.

The policy also recommends that owners restrict cats' and dogs' access to carrion and animal carcasses, give their pets clean and fresh commercially prepared or home-cooked food, dispose of uneaten food at least once daily, and wash their hands before and after handling pet foods, treats, and food dishes. The policy does not apply to milk fed to animals prior to weaning when the milk comes from the same species.

More than 90 percent of delegates voted in favor of the policy, but thousands of people—through a petition at Change.org and comments on the AVMA’s website—tried to discourage the HOD from enacting it.

During the HOD deliberations, Dr. Kenneth E. Bartels, delegate for Oklahoma, said a committee of delegates had examined the proposed policy and recommended amending it to suggest that, if pet owners are going to feed their cats or dogs raw or undercooked animal-source protein, veterinarians should tell those clients about ways to reduce pathogen risks. Dr. Brian Gerloff, president of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners, said raw meat is needed for some animals such as sled dogs, and the change would let veterinarians give advice that fits those animals while remaining in compliance with AVMA policy.



Dr. Joni Scheffel, delegate from Minnesota, discusses a proposed amendment to the resolution on feeding of raw or undercooked animal-source protein to dogs and cats during the House of Delegates’ August session

Photo by R. Scott Nolen

Dr. Robert M. Groskin, alternate delegate for the Association of Avian Veterinarians, argued that such revisions would weaken the intent of the resolution. He likened such a change to a physician telling a patient not to smoke, but if the patient were going to continue smoking, recommending using filtered cigarettes and limiting the number of cigarettes smoked daily.

About two-thirds of delegates voted against the proposed amendment, but about 90 percent voted in favor of changing the language to say people should avoid feeding—rather than never feed—such foods to dogs and cats.

Motives questioned

Dr. Laurie S. Coger, a veterinarian at Bloomingrove Veterinary Hospital in Rensselaer, N.Y., was among more than 3,800 supporters of the petition at Change.org. She said on the site and in an interview after the delegates approved the policy that she feeds her dogs raw animal protein and counsels clients on doing the same.

Dr. Coger said in the interview that she wants her dogs’ food to consist of ingredients that are of high enough quality to be sold for human consumption.

“I want complete control over what goes into my pets, and I want to know that it’s clean, safe, fresh, and not processed,” she said.

Dr. Coger also was among those who accused the AVMA of taking the action because of influence by pet food producers. On Change.org, she said the delegates’ vote showed AVMA is a “puppet of the pet food industry.”

Dr. David M. Chico, chair of the AVMA Council on Public Health and Regulatory Veterinary Medicine, said the AVMA began considering implementing a policy on raw animal protein in pet food after the Delta Society, which was recently renamed as Pet Partners, asked whether the AVMA had any policies against feeding such foods to pets. Pet Partners is a nonprofit organization that operates service animal and animal therapy programs, and, as the Delta Society, it implemented in June 2010 a policy that prohibits pets that eat raw animal protein from participating in its animal therapy program.

Dr. Chico, who is a veterinarian for the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, said he and fellow council members all work in state or federal government positions, and they developed and reviewed their draft of the policy without contact with any pet food companies or other groups outside the AVMA.

“Our motive for generating this policy is genuine concern for public health, and while it may be difficult to give a specific number of human cases of illness that are associated with this, really the policy is about mitigating risk,” Dr. Chico said. “And we know that, when animals feed or are fed raw or unprocessed animal protein sources, that there’s a risk of infection and shedding of the organism.”

Figures in the 2010 National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System Executive Report, which was published in July 2012, indicate that, in 2010, 64 percent of retail meat samples tested for *Escherichia coli* were positive for the bacteria, including about 80 percent each of chicken breast and ground turkey samples. About 38 percent of chicken breast samples tested were positive for *Campylobacter* spp.

Dr. Chico said that while a small percentage of people feed their pets raw or unprocessed animal proteins, their actions present a risk to public health, even though it is difficult to quantify.

Commercial or home-prepared

The Council on Public Health and Regulatory Veterinary Medicine planned to consider at its late-August meeting developing a policy connected with concerns related to processed foods. Dr. Chico said he understands people have concerns about disease outbreaks connected with commercially prepared pet foods.

The FDA issued a series of recall notices in April and May for commercial dog foods contaminated or potentially contaminated with *Salmonella* organisms. Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates at least 49 people had reported infections involving *S. Infantis* connected with the recalled foods, and 10 were hospitalized.

Dr. Chico said the council had simply dealt first with issues connected with raw meats, and the policy passed in August is intended to highlight risks connected with certain feeding practices.

“This policy wasn’t meant to endorse kibble,” he said. “It wasn’t meant to say that people could not prepare their own diets. It was to highlight and mitigate the risks that are associated with raw or underprocessed animal-source proteins.”

Fonte: <https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/120915q.aspx>