

A man in a red shirt is smiling and looking down at a table. A black dog is sitting on the table next to him. The background is a bright window with light streaming in.

NEIL THORNEYCROFT

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Kibble Kontroversy

Where Does Your Dog Food Come From?

By Phil Tripp

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We once joked that when we got Urban Animal up and running, someone would probably approach us to use our magazine's brand as the name of a dog food. After all, there's actor Dick Van Patten's Natural Balance (not related to Australian brand Natural Balance, see * below). Cesar Millan, the famed US cable channel Dog Whisperer about to tour here soon, has his brands of cans. Ellen DeGeneres has a human-grade range and even Paul Newman had his own pet food product before he passed away.

Celebrity chef Rachael Ray launched her Nutrish line with a recipe in 'Modern Dog' magazine which came back to bite her when it was criticised for containing onions which can be toxic to dogs. As it turned out it was a human recipe named after her dog not a pet recipe, but a lot of people got confused and Ray copped a bagging.

Lisa and I knew that if anything went wrong with a pet food named after Urban Animal or even Cuisine de Critters, we could be liable for lawsuits and loss of our carefully built reputation. This has certainly happened to a few importers we've known over the past couple of years who have either had to stop importing or recall their foods. But no chefs yet!

Needless to say, none of these chefs cook, bag or can the food themselves. They rely on contract manufacturers to take their recipes and turn them into mass-produced foods. And this is where all the trouble lies with the current crop of pet food and treat poisoning scandals. In the US, Canada and China recently, there have been major pet poisonings due to bad ingredients and additives. We're not immune in Australia as this story will show, with the recent recall of KraMar Supa Naturals chicken treats that were manufactured in China.

We're lucky that in Australia we generally have pure, local ingredients as well as high standards in the pet manufacturing sector. I was lucky to have been invited late last year by one of the major multinational pet food manufacturers to tour their plant with no restrictions to access or questions. It was an eye-opener and the standards of hygiene and food processing were world class as were the daily product reviews and testing.

There are a number of local manufacturers here and in New Zealand that make foods for their multinational brands or under contract for other brands which do not have manufacturing facilities. In one case, oddly enough a vegan pet food, the maker takes over a small pet food manufacturing plant for a couple of days, cleans all of the processing equipment and then manufactures and bags their own batches.

There is no law to make country of origin mandatory to consumers—as is the case with fish for example. The prospect for disaster is just a matter of time.

In previous issues (see end of article) we've extensively covered the manufacturing processes and the variety of ingredients used which range from organic, holistic and fresh to bogus and dubious. So we won't repeat all this here. Go to our back issues.

Before we go into how best to choose the prepared foods and treats you feed your dog, cat or bird, let's look at the most recent incidents that occurred in the past couple of months. These centre around irradiating imported foods such as Orijen, counterfeit packaging being used to disguise inferior food being passed off as a superpremium brand called Optima, supposed contamination of a Chinese manufactured pet treat for Australian distributor KraMar and just a few weeks ago, the recall of a broad range of foods including pet treats, that contained peanut butter which had salmonella.

The KraMar incident was the most troubling initially as news stories hit the media that the company's Supa Naturals dried chicken breast strips appeared to be linked to dogs coming down with a disease called Fanconi-Like Syndrome. The symptoms are decreased food appetite, lethargy, vomiting, diarrhoea, sometimes with blood as well as increased water intake and /or increased urination.

Dr. Linda Fleeman BVSc PhD MACVSc, Senior Lecturer in Small Animal Medicine from the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney decided to investigate the issue of some instances of this illness in dogs, where a common link seemed to be the Supa Natural treats. While KraMar tests all of its treats manufactured in China for E-coli and salmonella bacteria infestation as well as melamine added as an adulterant to food—which in other overseas brands had caused pets dying in the past—it also asserted that its Chinese manufacturing facility was approved by the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service and all tests were clear.

But KraMar, because of concerns for health and welfare—as well as the obvious potential of litigation—voluntarily withdrew the product December 9. All stocks were to be removed from stores, which received notices on the recall, and a press release was issued that warned consumers that if their pets exhibited the symptoms to consult their vet. KraMar also stated that they were exploring the potential moving the production of Supa Natural products to Australia.

Unfortunately, not all retailers complied with the recall and some stock was still on sale in January. Either it was overlooked or retailers just didn't care. However, the news of the recall made TV, radio and newspaper front pages and the fallout was bad not only for KraMar, a company that has been making and importing pet products for 50 years and which recently had a major investment by an insurance and financial group to expand operations and product lines, it also caused panic among consumers, who became sensitive to products being manufactured offshore.

A large number of pet treats imported into Australia are manufactured in the Pacific Rim. Pigs' ears come from China, Thailand, The Philippines, Indonesia and other countries as do rawhide products, organ meat treats like dried liver and other dried offcut products. India and Sri Lanka also produce pet treats.

All imported products are subject to AQIS regulation and inspection and may be directed to be irradiated, or turned back, but sometimes, things get through. In the case of pigs ears, for example, the most common problem can be salmonella, which can be transmitted to humans handling the treats. Because these treats are packaged in bulk and distributed to pet stores, vets, market stalls and other outlets without labeling as to country of origin, the retailer and end user often have no idea whether their treats were locally manufactured or part of a container load shipped in from overseas.

Add to this the fact that some companies have brands that contain both local and imported meats under different labels and the fact that there is no law to make country of origin mandatory to consumers—as fish must now be identified, as an example—and the prospect for disaster is just a matter of time. So consumers have been reading packages and rejecting treats that are made in China and other Asian territories or that don't give country of manufacture.

The more recent tragedy that hit the media was over Orijen cat food with chronic illness and death among cats linked to consuming the superpremium imported brand. The ABC 7:30 Report had a long story on this (still viewable online). There were tragic and heart-wrenching scenes but also a few errors. Dr Georgina Child of the University of Sydney's veterinary hospital said that the only factor that linked the 40 initial victims was Orijen and the symptoms were wobbliness and weakness in the animals' back legs.

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