



Talking nutrition with clients: A roundtable discussion

Recommending non-therapeutic diets, including natural pet foods

Moderator



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The myriad of non-therapeutic pet food choices available today can be daunting to both pet owners and veterinary practitioners, who are often called upon by clients to recommend the best diet for their pets. A group of veterinary professionals recently gathered to talk about the importance of discussing nutrition with clients, the growth in natural pet foods and what is needed to recommend non-therapeutic diets with confidence, and the necessity of ensuring the quality and safety of pet foods.

Dr. Sherry Sanderson: Let's start with basic nutrition. In conversations with clients on various aspects of health, how frequently do you discuss basic nutrition?

Dr. Ellen K. Cook: With every single client. In our practice, all medical records are computerized. We have a special code for diet that is entered in at every single client visit. It's been a number-one priority in my practice.

Dr. Peter Sakas: It's a big part of our client education. Our technicians play a very important role in these discussions. I'll introduce clients to the concept of the proper diet for their pets, and the technician will take it from there.

Dr. Andrea La Raus: Many of my clients view their pets as extensions of their family, so nutrition is really on their minds. It's an important part of the conversation through kitten and puppy stages and on through to adulthood. Diet is also very important for my geriatric patients, who often have special needs.

Julie Legred: I agree that nutrition plays a big role in every life stage, and it should be talked about with every client. Technicians and staff spend a lot of time with clients, so helping the whole hospital team deliver a clear, consistent message across the board is really important.

Discussing nutrition with clients

Sanderson: What prompts those discussions with the clients? Do you bring it up, or do they?

Cook: I always ask clients what they are feeding their pets, not just for life stages but also depending upon the state of a pet's health (e.g. the pet may be obese or diabetic or have joint health problems). But even with normal, healthy patients, it is important to address nutrition.

Legred: It should be part of the history taking and all exams.

Cook: My technicians discuss diet initially with clients. I'll go in and reinforce that, and then my technicians follow up with my specific recommendations so that clients are hearing it repeatedly.

La Raus: Although I bring up the topic of nutrition and ask what the pets are eating, I find that sometimes clients are more honest with the technicians or the receptionist about what they are really feeding.

Sanderson: Do you find that if a client gets a food recommendation from a breeder or a pet store clerk, the client will believe them over you?

Sakas: The breeder, definitely. Breeders will say, "Your vet is going to tell you differently, but this is what you should feed your dog." So, we have to work at overcoming that type of thinking.

Sanderson: Do you find you are able to influence clients more than breeders or pet store clerks?

Cook: It's a matter of building the relationship and trust. Take the example of a client who believes the clerk in the pet store. I'll ask that client, what is the pet store's focus? They're

in the business of selling food to you, and I'm in the business of keeping your pet as healthy as possible. So, I encourage my clients to come in with a long list of questions. That's when technicians are very helpful. My appointment slots are a half hour. I probably spend half that time with the client and the rest of the time, my technician is with that client. The technician's assistance in educating the client is as important as my own.

La Raus: The breeder or pet store person—even some of the websites out there—is so dogmatic in presenting nutrition, as if it is black and white. I think most of us would agree there are significant shades of gray. There is no one best solution for all pets.

Legred: Until they visit the veterinarian, hear what he or she has to say, and form a relationship, clients are going to rely on the breeder for information. That's the first person they talk to. Clients want to do everything perfectly for their pets, so they listen to the first person they hear recommendations from to immediately care for their pets.

Sanderson: Where do you turn for information and education on nutrition?



La Raus: I rely heavily on VIN, especially the clinical nutrition folder and some of their online continuing education. The ACVN (American College of Veterinary Nutrition) website is also informative. There are other online self-paced courses that I have found helpful.

Cook: There is a lot of good information and continuing education available, including on pet food websites.

Legred: There's also a lot of nutrition education specifically available to technicians.

Sakas: A lot of the continuing education and client education handouts we receive help with clients, too. Materials such as the AAHA guidelines and assessment reinforce our discussions. We also give handouts to clients with all our instructions to take home.

La Raus: In addition to handouts, websites that you can refer clients to are good as well. They may misplace a handout, but they'll bookmark links and go back to them.

Cook: I recommend websites of some of the more reputable pet food companies to clients, such as The Nutro Company, Hill's Pet Nutrition or The Iams Company, and have links to those websites on my clinic website.

Natural and organic pet foods

Sanderson: It sounds as if you are comfortable talking about nutrition with your clients. Any areas where you are perhaps less comfortable?

La Raus: Yes, one of my questions involves foods labeled as *natural* or *human-grade*. I have difficulty talking about that with my clients and don't know that I truly understand what those mean.

Cook: I have the same question, too. What exactly is natural? And what is organic?

Sanderson: Sounds like a good time to discuss the differences between *natural*, *organic* and *human-grade*. Those terms are often used interchangeably, but they are really not the same. *Organic* implies the way in which the plants or the animals were raised, and while there's no pet standard, the pet food industry follows the human organic program. If a pet food is organic, it actually should contain an organic seal that denotes it meets the human standard. *Natural* implies that there are no chemical or synthetic materials in the diet. There is a big difference between these two terms, and I don't think very many clients understand that difference. And regarding *human-grade*, there is no absolute standard for human-grade and a lot of the ingredients that go into pet food are human-grade. Clients assume that it means a higher level of safety, but that's not the case. Almost every week there's news about an issue in the human food chain, whether it's salmonella in peanut butter or E. coli on spinach. You are not alone; I'm sure there are many excellent practitioners still uncomfortable discussing natural, organic and the like with clients. We don't want to misinform them; we want to answer their questions knowledgeably. I think that's important.

Sakas: It seems to be quite a trend with our clients now because some want diets that are natural and holistic. We even see this with medications—clients would rather sometimes treat disease conditions holistically.

Cook: In recent months, several clients have told me they're feeding their dog or cat gluten-free, corn-free, grain-free, or something else-free and believe it's the best thing.

Sanderson: Extremes in a diet are not necessarily the best way to go. When grains are removed, you're cutting a lot of very important fiber sources out of that diet. There is no reason to go grain-free for a normal healthy animal. It is just one of those niches that has developed and seems appealing to a lot of clients. Unfortunately, I think it is doing a disservice

Sakas: Along this track, I'd like to comment on another pet food fad: raw diets. People are always talking about the BARF (biologically appropriate raw food or bones and raw food) diet. I tell my clients to avoid them because of potential risks with these diets. But it seems to be a trend that's being talked about quite a bit.

Sanderson: I agree. Raw diet advocates are very passionate about it and do not want to be told anything else. I think it's an area of concern in that those who recommend raw diets are opening themselves up for litigation.

Legred: This is something we will continually have to deal with. We need to educate clients on why they shouldn't be feeding a raw diet. We'll encounter some clients who insist on

doing this despite our recommendations, and we'll need to especially follow up on these individual patients.

La Raus: Along these lines, sometimes when I recommend a therapeutic diet—be it for skin, renal, hepatic or other issues—clients look at the ingredient label for those buzz words *natural, organic or holistic*. If they are not satisfied with the labeling, they reject the diet and then search for something over the counter that, in their minds, is the same thing or better. It's been a real frustration for me.

Cook: I had that same problem. One of the things I have found helpful is telling clients this is what I recommend and would use with my own pet. For non-therapeutic diets, I tell them this is what I have fed my own dogs and cats for a number of years.

Recommending non-therapeutic diets

Sanderson: Talking about non-therapeutic diets that you recommend, on what do you base your recommendation?

Sakas: It's the quality of the ingredients. In addition, we see so many allergies in dogs. One of the first things I evaluate in an allergic dog is the diet. We now have so many different types of novel protein diets. If a dog has a food-ingredient allergy, we can attempt to eliminate those allergens, so we talk to the client about changing the diet. Clients are on board with this as long as you can explain it to them. That's probably the most important thing.

Legred: For me, it's the research behind it. AAFCO certification of "complete and balanced" plays a big part, too.

Cook: Because everybody has jumped on the premium diet bandwagon in recent years, I also recommend only those diets that have stood the test of time in addition to meeting AAFCO requirements and diets that I have fed to my own pets. I pretty much stick with HILL'S, EUKANUBA and NUTRO® pet food as my standard basic recommendations. Then I vary that according to an animal's specific health condition or stage of life.

Legred: I think it's also the reputation of the company and materials that are available to help and educate technicians and veterinarians.

La Raus: The availability of a diet is a factor as well. If there's a diet that is effective but has limited availability, client compliance is not going to be great. A peer's experience with a food is also really helpful to me. There are so many choices. Sometimes you find out that pet food is not the main business of the parent company and they're just jumping on the bandwagon.

Sakas: With me, it's mostly based on personal experience. Through the years, we've all had good and bad experiences with food. So, when you're comfortable with a certain diet you can suggest it to your client in good faith. I also like a company being receptive to questions and concerns from the veterinarian and pet owner alike.

Sanderson: You bring up a good point. I think one very important thing that should be on a pet food label is a toll-free number. That tells me that the company makes it easy for



practitioners to call them and welcomes their calls. The other thing is making sure there is someone at the other end of the line who can answer our questions. Let's talk now about diets with additional nutritional benefits such as enhanced fatty acids or others. Do you recommend diets that contain those kinds of things?

Sakas: Not necessarily. Take the joint diets, for example. Is there a sufficient level of glucosamine to have a therapeutic effect? I really wonder about that.

La Raus: I will recommend diets with fatty acids especially for cats, only because I'm hoping that it can minimize how much medication the owners might have to give their cats.

Sanderson: You're talking about diets that are supplemented with omega-3 fatty acids?

La Raus: Yes, with the hope that they contain therapeutic levels.

Sanderson: How about for animals that have sensitive GI tracts? Do you ever strive to get a diet that has prebiotics in it or anything for gut health?

Sakas: I've never really recommended those for that issue, but it's a good idea.

Cook: I have recommended those diets more recently if the patient has chronic recurring problems.

Discussing and recommending natural foods to clients

Sanderson: Let's talk a bit more about natural. More and more pet owners are interested in natural diets. What has been your experience with clients asking questions about natural foods?

Legred: It's what many think they should be feeding. They are hearing that is what's best for people, so it is natural for them to think that this is the route they should be going with their pets as well.

Cook: It has definitely been increasing in the last five years. I've noticed a big increase in clients' concern that they are feeding a natural diet.

Sakas: If they see two bags and one says "all natural" and one is regular food, they are going to choose the natural. It's a frame of mind.

La Raus: I had some patients that were affected during the melamine crisis. That really increased the questions and clients' perception that if it's natural, it must be safer. They are just trying to do the best they can for their pets.

Sanderson: What percentage of your clients currently feed a natural food?

La Raus: About 40 percent.

Cook: I would say probably 10 to 15 percent. But that's a lot higher than it was ten years ago.

Sakas: I'm not sure of the exact percentage, but we certainly have more clients asking about natural foods.

Sanderson: If a client comes in with a question about a natural food, are you comfortable discussing that with them?

Sakas: Not too much, because we don't really know what a "natural" food really is. I would say if it is really a quality food from a nutritional standpoint, then I am comfortable. I just don't have the comfort level with some of these foods, yet because we don't know the standards.

Cook: And there are new foods out every day. I'll ask the client either to bring in the label, or I will try to find it on the Internet. I'll always find a food online, but there will be no information on ingredients, AAFCO certification and so forth.

Legred: That's a big red flag.

Cook: Yes, and that is exactly what I tell the client.

Legred: There are some companies that don't even engage with veterinarians and technicians. Then you question whether it's a food you can trust.

Cook: They will get a celebrity to tout their product, and then you can't find any kind of basic nutritional information about it whatsoever.

La Raus: Or, they send their reps to the pet food stores. I've overheard many of those conversations with pet owners, and too often it's just not good or valid information.

Sanderson: What kind of research would you like to see on natural diets?

Sakas: I'd like to see research that demonstrates that a natural food can fulfill the pet's nutritional needs. Just because the ingredients are natural, is it also nutritionally complete and balanced? Also, I would like to know how well the food quality is sustained. I would have confidence in a natural food that provides complete and balanced nutrition as well as having an appropriate shelf life.

Legred: The quality of the ingredients.

Sanderson: What do you mean by quality?

La Raus: Digestibility and freshness.

Cook: The source of the nutrients. I tell my clients no matter what you read and see about our food safety problems, the United States has by far the safest food sources in the world. And the quality of the protein, too. I tell clients, "Look at what you eat. Look at how expensive your source of protein is. You can't buy a good source of protein for ten cents a pound. The

same thing is true for your pet." Also, over the years I've seen patients given foods with high levels of preservatives, dyes and chemicals that have more skin and GI issues, but that is strictly anecdotal experience. But because of that, I don't recommend those foods, and that would be a case where I feel a natural diet would be a better option.

Ensuring quality and food safety

Sanderson: We've talked about aspects of quality and food safety. How would you like manufacturers to address those areas?

Sakas: Explaining quality control and what they actually do to guarantee quality and safety would be good. How do they check and periodically test to make sure? I would like to know they are taking that extra step.

LaRaus: Cleanliness of the manufacturing facility is a factor, too.

Sanderson: That's an important quality control as well as testing ingredients for pathogens like mycotoxin and various infectious elements in protein sources.

Legred: Actually being able to tour the manufacturing plants is great. To see the operation, controls, tests, research—everything that a product goes through. That builds more confidence.

Sakas: Manufacturers could help us and clients by posting information on their websites—frequently asked questions, addressing myths and misconceptions and so forth.

Cook: Or, perhaps also a virtual tour of manufacturing facilities and research on DVD for distribution to the general practitioner community.

La Raus: I think some people would respond that a company would, of course, say good things about their process and product because it's in their interest to do so. It would be ideal to have a third party to qualify and disseminate quality and safety information. That would be more credible.

Sanderson: Any final thoughts?

Cook: After 35 years in practice, I find that the pet's nutrition and its general lifestyle are the most important factors in keeping that pet healthy. I'm a firm believer in medication, but too often we reach for drugs to fix things that could be better addressed by a change in diet or lifestyle. That's so important at every stage of a pet's life and to building a bond and relationship with your clients. Diet is critical. You are what you eat.

LaRaus: As Hippocrates said, "Let food be your first medicine," right?

Sanderson: That's a great ending point. Thank you all for participating in today's discussion.