

Holistic science in veterinary medicine, animal husbandry and management

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION

### **NUTRITION AND MEDICINE – DOGS**

The often quoted saying of Hippocrates, the Greek physician, 'let medicine be thy food and food thy medicine' illustrates that optimum nutrition has always been regarded as a cornerstone of medicine. In addition to the acknowledgment that good food was essential for the prevention and recovery from disease, it was also recognised that many foods had medicinal as well as nutritional properties. The two were inextricably linked in this way until the middle of the twentieth century when synthetic compounds replaced traditional drugs from vegetable sources. This effectively drove a wedge between the two and today some find it difficult to relate to this concept.

As the pharmaceutical industry introduced more effective synthetic compounds to replace the traditional vegetable based drugs, such as the opiates from the poppy and others that could be used for a dramatic effect, expertise in the use of such traditional medicines declined. Along with this, knowledge of the more gentle medicinal plants, together with foods which could be used for medicinal purposes, also declined. With the development of the new pharmaceutical products, legislation was introduced which had the effect of changing the way we perceived the relationship between nutrition and health. Under this, substances were by definition as either 'food' or 'medicine', and a product could no longer be both. Food was made by food manufacturers and medicines by the pharmaceutical and chemical industries. Food was bought at a grocery store and medicine was bought at a chemist or prescribed by a doctor or veterinary surgeon (or dentist).

To illustrate this, here are the relevant modern definitions (Cambridge University Press 2005) You may like to contrast these with the words of Hippocrates above.

*Medicine - a substance, especially in the form of a liquid or a pill, which is a treatment for illness or injury*

By this definition a medicine is given to alleviate symptoms when an animal is unwell.

*Food - something that people and animals eat, or plants absorb, to keep them alive.*

By this definition a food has nothing to do with disease, injury or pain.

In the United Kingdom, largely in the interests of the public, all modern medicines must be rigorously tested and licensed for manufacture, sale and use, under the Medicines Act. Similar legislation is in force in all developed countries. Such products are strictly controlled, and 'prescription only' drugs may only be prescribed by a relevant medical professional trained in pharmacology. All modern medicines have to go through rigorous 'safety' 'efficacy' and 'quality' testing at a cost of many thousands of pounds. Through this legislation the public is also protected against ineffective 'quack' medicines, by ensuring that claims for the efficacy of the product are justifiable.

Modern pharmaceutical products are undoubtedly invaluable in medicine, as were the vegetable based medicines before them, and I think most people would agree that this legislation is a sensible measure for such products. What is not sensible I feel is that, as it stands, the current legislation prevents manufacturers from making perfectly sensible claims about the positive health benefits of traditionally formulated foods and herbal products, which have been used over the millennia for the prevention and management of many ailments. Take for example food formulated according to the principles of Natural Nutrition, which not only provide good health whilst supporting the natural vitality of the body, but also may contain a variety of nutritional herbage and other natural substances to provide nutritional therapy in a variety of circumstances – a principle which I think Hippocrates would have recognised.

The legislation is framed in such a way so that a product 'falls' under the Medicines Act if a 'medicinal claim' is made. If no medicinal claim is made, it falls under the Feeding Stuffs Regulations, (there are certain exceptions, but this would distract us from the point). If a medicinal claim is made, the product has to satisfy stringent safety, quality and efficacy regulations, which is extremely expensive and makes little sense, except in the case of substances which are to be used for dramatic purposes i.e. pharmacy medicines. So if we were to return to our examples above, the regulations would work well and are perfectly justifiable in the case of say a potent pharmaceutical pain killer, but obviously not in the case of potentially medicinal foodstuffs such as oats for example, because, even though oats are listed as a sedative in the historical technical literature for all to see, it should not be mentioned as such if it were sold as a food. The problem is that the term 'medicinal claim' is subjective – even though the sedative effects of oats are extremely mild and difficult to quantify in the way that pharmaceutical products are evaluated, it is still a possible effect. It would be quite in order, in my view, to say that 'oats may aid restful sleep' because they can do – but to call oats a sedative would be a medicinal claim.

Legislation with regard to feeding stuffs and medicines has been under increasing criticism since the recent resurgence of the use of milder herbs and other natural substances to prevent and manage diseases in the traditional way. Many 'straight' herbs such as the analgesic, devil's claw

*(harpagophytum procumbens)* are sold under the UK regulations as 'food' although they are promoted as being useful to maintain joint mobility (the use of the words 'analgesic' or 'arthritis' would be construed as a medicinal claim). Similarly these types of products are included in foods. Green lipped muscle, for example, is an increasingly popular inclusion in rations for older dogs because it has been associated with the relief of joint pain.

The current legislation in the UK leaves much to be desired, it leaves loopholes for unscrupulous manufacturers and also prevents reputable manufacturers from being able to describe their products as they should be able to. Of course there should be safeguards but the current legislation is increasingly difficult to apply. In other words it does not work. Other countries deal with these anomalies in different ways through their legislation and in the UK, ours is about to change as we gain parity with European standards, but the basic problem of categorisation remains.

As discussed, with modern medicines, there is the safeguard that they have been rigorously tested for safety, efficacy and quality. Foods marketed as 'holistic' which may claim to have 'medicinal properties' have not been through such procedures – in other words the consumer has to take the manufacturer's word for it. A growing number of food products are now certified holistic through the BAHNM scheme, which seeks to address these issues.

**For free technical information on integrated nutrition and medicine and for advice in specific circumstances contact: [tech.help@bahnm.org.uk](mailto:tech.help@bahnm.org.uk)**

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