

institutes on their own before any animals or people get sick. Unfortunately, this information will not be on the pet food label and as such won't typically factor positively into pet food rankings or ratings."

What is the pet food industry in Australia doing to track health problems in pets that are suspected of being associated with pet food, treats and pet meat?

PFIAA with the AVA implemented a joint initiative, 'Pet Food Adverse Event System of Tracking (PetFAST)', which is an Australian veterinary reporting system allowing veterinary practitioners to report any clinical cases where they suspect pet illness might be associated with pet food or pet meat sold in the country. It has been in operation for a number of years.

"This world-first initiative is another example of the commitment of the Australian pet food industry to product quality and pet safety," said Dr Hall. (For more information, visit www.ava.com.au/petfast)

However, pet owner confidence in pet food needs boosting. Packed Facts' *Millennials as Pet Market Consumers* report shows 75 per cent of Millennials agree that fear of pet food contamination or product safety is a key consideration in the foods they buy. And for those who turn to home-cooked food may be putting their pet's health at risk because DIY pet food may not be 'complete and balanced', as required in commercial pet foods.

"Studies have shown that the vast majority of recipes that pet owners design for their pets or obtain from magazines, books, or the Internet are deficient in one or more essential nutrients," says Dr Heinze.

DOES THE INDUSTRY NEED STRICTER STANDARDS?

Petfoodreviews.com.au and Howtofeedadog.com Founder David (surname not provided for personal reasons) believes the pet food industry needs to be better regulated with better transparency around labelling, stricter standards and more regulated independent testing of pet foods.

David – having no veterinary or nutrition background, simply personal interest in pet nutrition after losing his cat Rodney and extensive research into pet food – created Petfoodreviews.com.au as an independent

collection of reviews for cat and dog foods available in Australia that focuses on ingredients and guaranteed analysis.

The reviews on the website are direct result of information readily available from public sources – books, journals, research material and other publications, as well as common sense, he said.

"I've read and replied to thousands of emails from pet owners across the world, and have collaborated with pet food manufacturers who in turn have re-analysed their formulas and re-formulated," said David. "What I've learnt from my research is that a pet food can never be better than the ingredients that are in it. There are ways a manufacturer can make the ingredients look better than they are, and tell-tale signs that show the truth.

"If I had to rate the pet food industry, I'd say if pet food idealism was a 100km distance, we're only a few kilometres from the starting line. I want to raise awareness and make people think about the pet food choices they make for the furry friends they love so much."

David questioned the quality of supermarket phantom brands, which according to last year's Euromonitor International's *Pet Care in Australia* report is expected to continue being used. Earlier this year, Woolworths was under fire when Pet Food Reviews website received almost 200 reports of dogs becoming ill after eating the supermarket home brand Baxter's products, with some of those reports linked to fatalities.

Woolworths did not pull the food from its shelves, saying in various news reports that all Woolworths products undergo rigorous and extensive testing before they are made available to customers in-store and this product complies with the relevant Australian standards.

HOW CAN VETS PLAY A ROLE IN NUTRITION EDUCATION?

The pet food industry also has much work to do to educate consumers about pet nutrition. Pet food companies are helping to build consumer confidence by partnering with veterinarians in educating pet owners about pet nutrition.

As shown by a pet owner survey conducted for Packaged Facts' Petfood Forum 2018 conference presentation,

two-thirds of dog or cat owners strongly or somewhat agree that veterinarian recommendation is important to which pet foods they buy, as one facet of brand reputation.

David from Petfoodreviews encouraged university veterinary science programs to include more material on nutrition without influence (and sponsorships) from major pet food manufacturers.

"Currently, syllabus material is provided for and branded by manufacturers with an aim to make students aware of products and what to recommend. Educating veterinarians on holistic nutrition would dramatically improve pet health," he said.

Is the veterinary industry compromised by pet food companies? Veterinarian Dr Richard Malik, a consultant for Sydney University's Centre for Veterinary Education, has made public about his concerns with the commercialisation of vet practices, the influence on student vets and continuous professional development of qualified vets. In an ABC TV 7.30 Report interview, he called for the veterinary profession to distance itself from the global pet care industry⁶.

AVA President Dr Paula Parker told ABC TV's 7.30 Report last month: "We are fortunate to have a good relationship with them [pet food companies] but we are clear what the boundaries of those relationships are."⁷

The AVA did not respond to *Pet Industry News* interview requests, but the website explains the veterinary code of professional conduct: Whilst this Code reflects the professional commitment of AVA members, it should be relevant to all practising veterinarians⁵.

Marge Chandler, Co-Chair of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) Global Nutrition Committee, said the WSAVA also recommends pet owners ask manufacturers whether the company employs a veterinary nutritionist.

In 2011 (revised 2013), the Global Nutrition Committee produced small animal nutrition guidelines with the specific aim of promoting the importance of nutritional assessments and recommendations to every pet at

