

TRACIE'S THOUGHTS ABOUT THE RECENT PET FOOD RECALL

You know me as your dog's and cat's best friend from my radio shows CAT CHAT™ and DOG TALK®, and I realize many of you are waiting for me to give you some guidance in this disturbing event surrounding tainted pet food. I appreciate how upset many of you have been about the reports in the press of deaths of dogs and cats from what appears to be contaminated food from a manufacturer that made foods for about 50 pet food labels. Of course I share sadness over the death of any pet, but I want to caution everyone to slow down and calm down in reacting to this news. Kerry Nolan, the host of Living Today on the Martha Stewart Channel of Sirius Radio, asked me to come on the air Monday to help sort out the facts for listeners – I joined her again Wednesday March 21st at 1 PM Eastern Time (as I always do on Wednesday before CAT CHAT™ at 8 that night), and we talked about this further.

Right now I want to share some of my observations with all of you, whom I consider my constituents. I take your faith in me with the utmost humility and do not take the responsibility lightly. That is why this letter may seem a little late in coming to you: there was no point in sending you wrong information, and everything I was reading and hearing in the press struck me as incorrect. It also is very long, but this issue is so much more complex than at first it may seem that it requires a lot of detail. I spent the time because you and your pets are worth it. There are still very many holes in the stories we have been told – as I'll explain in a moment – but my desire to get everyone to slow down and calm down while we watch the Menu Foods company look for answers and tell us what is really going on.

The first thing to keep in mind is that facts are still being gathered. There is a great deal unclear, and suspicious, too. The time line is this: the company that made the dog and cat foods issued statements at 6 AM on Saturday March 17th (traditionally the kind of time to release information that you do not want to get coverage in the weekday media). Menu Foods in Canada – but with manufacturing plants in Kansas City and New Jersey - said that it did not know what ingredient(s) might have been responsible for the reported kidney failures and deaths. They could only guess that it was the wheat gluten from a new supplier that had to be the culprit since that was the only new element in the foods made. (For myself, I immediately questioned why it had to be a “new” ingredient – why couldn’t it be from contamination of a meat or other source that was full of something deadly? And why was no one asking that question aloud?)

On Saturday the company released the names of the potentially tainted foods - only specific brands, flavors and manufacturing lot numbers of canned and pouched wet foods from well-known labels like Eukanuba, Iams, Science Diet, and Nutro Natural Choice. Many store brands and lesser quality foods were also listed. If you aren’t aware of this situation and want to see that list, go to www.menufoods.com/recall. There you will find a series of links to the companies for which they made the foods, then on each of those websites, the precise flavors and lot numbers of batches of food are listed. Sunday the television news showed vet clinics full of anxious pet owners, and by Monday April 19th the news was mentioned everywhere, along with the company’s web link. Apparently the Menu Foods phone line became so deluged with calls that no one could get through –

although there is no reason for anyone to make a phone call beyond seeing the information on the list.

The first thing I did Monday morning was contact the Official Vet of DOG TALK®, Dr. Philip Padrid, of Chicago, who very kindly took time out from his practice to give me a quick description of kidney failure and whatever solid evidence and facts he had accumulated. As of Monday morning March 19th, the big picture was still very sketchy. Phil Padrid is a doctor closely connected to the national veterinary community, and despite press reports of 10 – even 20 – animals having died, Dr. Padrid said that to his knowledge only two young cats were confirmed to have died from eating the affected food. No dogs at all had been killed – there were *reports* of dead dogs, but no confirmation. As the day wore on, this apparently bona fide fact was never reported – nor has it ever been corroborated.

This confirmed my own suspicions about the vague nature of the press reports. If there were 20 deaths, where were these dead animals? If there were 10 deaths, where were their grieving and outraged owners and family members? Where were the photos of these pets? And what about the 2 definite young cats the vets thought were dead? Were there not any deaths – or did the animals not belong to anyone?

My suspicions were also aroused because this food scare was so different from last year's contamination of Diamond dry food and the apparently larger deadly crisis it created. The Diamond kibbled food was contaminated with deadly aflatoxin (a kind of mold that can develop in dry dog food) and it killed nearly 100 dogs. In the press at the time there were quotes, photos, concrete evidence – yet oddly, the general public did not seem to be half as concerned as they are about this recall. Perhaps because they didn't feed

that lesser brand it didn't seem personal to them – yet nearly 100 loved pet family members died. Now we have this huge attention in the press and a humongous recall of tens of millions of units of a product based on unconfirmed reports of deaths? Something didn't add up here, but I couldn't figure out the missing pieces.

What I needed to ask – as an objective journalist as well as an expert and advocate for pets, with many people looking to me for guidance and advice – is “What is fact? Is this problem really tiny and contained, or is it in danger of blowing up into a calamity? Was this wheat gluten issue a smokescreen, covering up something somebody didn't want us to know? Were we too caught up in our fear that we were not questioning the illogical facts?” Here are my common sense guidelines for you:

1) If your cat or dog **did not** eat any of the listed foods, you should not be worrying. If the problem included other foods, we would have heard about it by now.

2) If you have any of the listed foods in your pantry shelf, **do not open them**.

3) If your dog or cat **DID** eat any of the listed foods in the past days or even weeks and has any signs of not being well –lethargy, vomiting, and the other symptoms below - go right to the vet or an emergency facility. A simple blood test will show kidney problems. Medical measures can be taken to save your pet if she is affected.

4) If your animal was exposed to these foods and seems fine but you are worried, make an appointment with your vet just to put your mind at ease – but an *appointment*, no an emergency visit. Your doctor will decide whether a blood test is called for.

5) Signs of kidney failure can include lethargy, vomiting, weakness, lack of appetite, and a dramatic increase or decrease in drinking water or urinating. I might add

that if your pet has these symptoms at any time in her life you must go right to the vet regardless of what she has eaten. (An Associated Press report on Tuesday march 20th about a woman in Chicago was who already suing the company had a 9 year old cat who had never had the benefit of a vet visit and who she kept at home for four days of an illness that increased from lethargy to near blindness – all this *before* the recall. Please folks, know that a cat showing signs of sickness needs medical attention within 24 hours.)

6) Nobody knows for sure what the length of time will be between a pet ingesting the apparently contaminated food and developing kidney problems since the ingredient-to-blame has yet to be determined. For example, if a dog or cat licks antifreeze, or a cat eats a lily, doctors do know the time frame when signs of kidney compromise will show up. But in this case there are too many unknown variables - particularly what this substance might be - to be able to tell you when problems will surface. However, if your pet has not eaten any of the listed foods, none of this applies to you unless your pet gets sick. Don't get caught up in a panicky state of mind regardless of what brand of food your animals are eating. Please avoid falling into the trap of mass panic, nothing is gained by it. Only by keeping our heads when those around us are freaking out can we try to get a fix on the Real Story.

I want to tell you how this saga has unfolded for me and how I have viewed it over the past three days so you can see how to step back and evaluate situations like this for yourself – do not take things at face value, do question authority, look for holes in logic and try to fill them. Especially where our animals are concerned, we are their first line of

defense and have to be on our toes on their behalf whether we are in our vet's office, at the pet food store or watching a government official on television.

What is Wrong with this Picture?

Now let me tell you some red flags that I saw waving over these murky waters yesterday, on Monday: there were some very obvious “holes” in this news story. The “facts” were too vague and inconsistent to be trustworthy –something was going on that did not make sense. A lot about this story smelled funny to me as an investigative journalist – as someone who has spent the last five years immersed in researching both THE DOG BIBLE and THE CAT BIBLE I have gotten adept at reading between the lines and finding inherent contradictions in a situation. In this case, I was suspicious because if a company announces a gigantic voluntary recall that will cost them \$40 million and has crashed their stock – then there has to be a lot at risk. We can only guess at that

The company did not give particulars about where or how animals died – or whether it was 10 animals – or 20 (numbers reported in the New York Times and elsewhere on Monday). Or was it only 2, as Dr. Padrid ascertained from his colleagues? And where were those animals: what states, towns were they? In whose house did they live - whose beloved four-legged family member were they? In such a tragic situation you would not find people being reticent or anonymous – they would be speaking up indignantly. If you were one of those people, surely you would go right to the press with your sorrow and rage? But there were no such identifiable people – not even the owners of those two young cats.

So on Monday, yesterday, I questioned the whole scenario: what if there were not that many dead animals – or at least not pets who lived with people? What if these were animals without human family members? What did the food companies know that they were not telling us? Some bits of information that seemed fishy to me:

1) At that point, not one individual pet owner had been identified as having lost a pet. The news media was everywhere with weepy and worried pet owners, but no particulars about one who said, “I fed such-and-such food and my pet is sick or died of kidney failure as a result.”

2) Buried inside one newspaper account I received was a reference to the afflicted animals as being “test animals being given the new food,” who were then taken off it when some died or were sickened - *after which the company made the recall*. This was a critical clue to the hidden truth about the recall. Did that mean that a new food ingredient or formula was being tested at the same time it had been canned and shipped for consumption? And for what reason would they have been testing wheat gluten, apparently an ordinary additive for these foods? Was it test animals that died and somebody doesn't want us to know they are conducting such tests – or to know the extent of it?

Sadly, I know it's certainly possible that tests on pet food can happen after the fact of selling a product, given that there are no rules or oversights about such things in the pet food industry, despite government seals of approval (that have no valid meaning) on pet foods. (In fact, it was disclosed on Tuesday – although buried in only one article and without the journalist realizing the importance – that F.D.A. inspectors who were now going to the two factories had never before visited the plants. That is because the

government does not oversee pet food operations, despite that seal and our assumption that they are on top of things.)

3) The potentially dangerous ingredient in the dog and cat food was described as “wheat gluten distributed by a new supplier.” It was further described as “a protein source” –followed by the company assertion that they were no longer using that ingredient or the supplier. Sounds well and fine unless you know that wheat gluten is not a source of protein – at least not protein that is usable by the body. For more clarity on that I got in touch with Sabine Contreras of www.TheDogFoodProject.com, who is the nutritional advisor on DOG TALK®. When I asked her what wheat gluten was doing in pet food, Sabine explained that in the manufacturing process of canned food, wheat gluten is used to make the artificial "texturized" pieces that look like they are cuts of actual pieces of muscle meat, when in truth generally only cheap byproducts are used, which are ground up beyond recognition and then "re-shaped" with the gluten as a processing aid. Think "Chicken McNuggets" and how they aren't prime cuts of breast fillet either. In human food wheat gluten is also used in baking to increase elasticity. I had thought it was probably there as a thickener for the pet food gravy, which was the reported use of the ingredient in the Associated Press on Tuesday March 20th.

Gluten is the "protein" part of the grain (as opposed to the starchy part used for flour), so the statement that wheat gluten is a source of protein is only technically correct - albeit poor quality protein that's not very nutritionally valuable. Proteins are the culprits in most allergies, that's why people and dogs with certain allergies often react so violently to high-gluten carb sources, but not low-gluten ones like for example white rice. (As an aside,

I happen to have celiac sprue disease which is an intolerance to gluten, as do millions of people, all of whom would know that is the part of grain that we are most allergic to, and it is never referred to as a protein source by anybody. I had to wonder why a food company would describe it in such a misleading way unless something else behind it?

4) Another point bothered me: was I the only person questioning what was really in the cans of all these diverse foods being made side-by-side in one gigantic food plant? Who was the “watchdog” to oversee that the origin of the ingredients and their processing wasn’t the same for all of them and packaged differently? Was there quality control or oversight by the companies whose names are on the cans to be sure that a more expensive and theoretically higher quality food, with lesser products, isn’t getting the same ingredients? Because if each brand was actually being made according to a separate recipe then what need would there be to recall every can made during a three month period – unless they all shared common ingredients before being labeled and priced differently?

My doubts were confirmed by the Associated Press article late on Tuesday March 20th: “The cuts and gravy style wet food was sold throughout North America under store brands carried by Wal-mart, Kroger, Safeway and other large retailers, as well as private labels like Iams, Nutro and Eukanuba.” This certainly gives the impression that the same food was in all those cans – the very thing I was questioning.

We Hadn’t Heard the Whole Story Yet

And that is why I held off writing to you – I held off until today when I knew something more had to surface. Listen, I could be dead wrong in my suspicions but I am not generally prone to paranoia or conspiracy theories. Ask any of my listeners and readers

and you'll hear me reject those "big business evil-doers" ideas. But something about this situation felt like a few bones were being thrown out to put people off the scent while the real problem was contained. I'm not saying I knew what was going on or being covered up, but my antennae are up and I think "the rest of the story" had yet to emerge.

More of the Story Emerges Today, Tuesday March 20th

Tuesday's New York Times article about Menu Foods confirmed many of my doubts and suspicions, although the journalist writing about it didn't realize that she was reporting a story still filled with holes in the logic. She reported that the company claimed that 7 of the dead animals were part of a test they had been conducting on the food which began last month – notice no mention of what species these animals were, no specifics about age or location - so it sounded as though, just as I had surmised, these were not pets. However, the article didn't say why they were testing in the first place. Wasn't wheat gluten presumably always in the "slices" and "chunks" gravy styles of food (none of which I have ever put on recommended lists of foods good to serve dogs or cats)? And in any case, which one of the 50 brands of food was being tested? All fifty on 50 "animals"? It made no sense. Did they know exactly which style and brand of food it was but were holding back the information? Was it dogs or cats they were using as the proverbial "guinea pigs" and why were they testing at all?

More Deaths Reported by 7 PM ET Tuesday

The F.D.A. confirmed in an AP press report that the death toll had reached 13 cats and one dog that had eaten the "cuts and gravy" style of food. For the first time, in the article reporting this in the Associated Press, it mentioned that, "The F.D.A. is screening

pet food samples for substances known to be toxic to the kidneys, like toxins produced by molds.” So now they let it slip that the wheat gluten may have been moldy. The aflatoxin mold on the Diamond dry food is what killed all those dogs last year before being recalled.

In this AP article the F.D.A. was quoted as saying that “Friday’s recall came two weeks after nine cats died during routine company taste tests of its products.” **Two weeks after nine deaths??** This was all new information. *Taste* tests? To see what – was there a new product being introduced?? Or a new ingredient other than the supposedly suspected wheat gluten? Or were these “safety” tests done only after people complained their pets became ill?

And then came the kicker: nestled in the middle of other lesser information in the same article, it was reported that **thirteen cats and dog had died as a result of eating this company’s food.** Confirmed facts. Carefully concealed.

What Kind of Delay was There in the Recall?

On the weekend when the news first trickled out, I was thinking what a great country we live in where there is accountability: a company does a voluntary recall and tells people the truth as a precaution. Now it seems that Menu Foods held off doing that. The company claimed that they began hearing from pet owners that their dogs were becoming ill after eating this food – but which food, which brand?? – and one week later on February 27th they decided to test the food on 40 to 50 animals. Let’s be sure we follow this progression: they had enough concern to find 50 animals on which to test the food – (but we don’t know which food) but only *after* some pets became ill enough for owners to contact them. Still, they did not alert the public to the possible jeopardy. Only last week –

2 ½ weeks after their own testing began - did the company alert the FDA about the deaths in their own tests. And apparently the FDA has a Center for Veterinary Medicine, which began “a full investigation.” This reported fact is also odd, since - contrary to popular belief about what the government seal on pet foods means - and the logical assumption that there is governmental oversight or inspection, that is not the case. As stated earlier, the F.D.A. had never set foot in these plants before – it’s not their job. In this case, it’s about the government checking the latch on the barn door after the horses have gone. Three household pets are known to have died after eating this contaminated food, and 7 test animals after that – but they claim to still have no idea what the contamination is from?? Do you find it as hard as I do to believe that after all these weeks the only clue they can come up with as a killer of animals is newly delivered wheat gluten? And what about the fact that the F.D.A. official, Dr. Stephen Sundlof, would not disclose the name of the gluten supplier, and claimed he “was working feverishly to determine” whether that company supplied any other pet food manufacturers. Surely in an emergency situation it cannot be all that hard for the F.D.A. to look at a company’s records of where they delivered their product? That’s if wheat gluten turns out to be the culprit here.

And now we are finally seeing the actual names and home towns and descriptions of people whose dogs either died or have permanent kidney damage. Strangely, since cats are more likely to be affected than dogs, and those two first confirmed deaths were reported to be cats, no individual cats and their owners have been identified. And apparently vets are beginning to go back and re-evaluate all deaths from renal failure and

other kidney disease that have occurred in the past two months. Officials say the death toll will rise as they try to confirm a precise number of deaths.

Hang in there friends

Stay calm, protect your pet by checking the brands you are feeding but also please learn to read the labels for now and evermore. The only person who truly deeply cares about what your pets eat is you – take responsibility for doing the best you can for them. Please do not misunderstand this food problem as an indictment of canned foods or a rationale to stick with or go back to feeding only kibble. Remember the Diamond dry food debacle just last year and how many dogs died from that. High quality, minimally-processed meat (and fish and fowl) protein needs to be 60% of your dog's diet, and 98% of your cat's diet. Dry food alone cannot supply that to a dog – and those who listen to CAT CHAT™ know that dry food is never an appropriate food for a cat. The irony is that those who have been feeding raw diets right along – often having to withstand criticism for the potential for contamination – must be feeling vindicated that their nutritional choice is the only one not under any suspicion right now.

To learn more about pet food and nutrition you can look in The Dog Bible and buy your dogs some of the foods on the nice long list of recommended canned foods (which never included any of those brands on the Menu Foods recall list). Cat people can go right to www.CatChatRadio.com to the nutrition section and print out the page of recommended supermarket and premium foods. Share the lists with friends, keep your animals safe, and let's keep our fingers crossed that this food fiasco is over and no more innocent animals will die.