Preface

Small Animal Nutrition

Nutrition plays a critical role in maintaining the health of pets or managing those with various health problems. The importance of veterinarians and the veterinary health care team in assessing the nutritional needs of their patients and in guiding the pet owners’ decisions about feeding their pets cannot be overstated. As of now, veterinarians remain the most important source of information about pet care and nutrition for pet owners, but this role is being overtaken by “Dr Google” and other social media and Internet sources. In order to address their clients’ questions and provide appropriate recommendations for them, veterinarians need to be confident in their own nutrition knowledge and ability to communicate about nutritional issues. This issue of Veterinary Clinic of North America: Small Animal Practice on Small Animal Nutrition was designed to help veterinarians expand their knowledge and skills in key nutrition topics. It covers a spectrum of topics, from commercial pet foods for healthy pets to nutritional management of common nutrient-sensitive diseases. Although most articles focus on dogs and cats, one article is dedicated to other small animals commonly seen by veterinarians, including gerbils, rabbits, and ferrets.

The first article in this issue deals with communication: how to efficiently and effectively talk about nutrition with your clients. A common issue raised by those in primary veterinary practice is the lack of time to pursue nutrition conversations with their clients. Members of the veterinary health care team will find tips and tools in this article to help make the most of the available time, relative to nutritional conversations.

Two articles on commercial pet food provide very different viewpoints. Although commercial pet foods have been around for well over a century, nutritionally balanced diets have only been generally available in the United States since the 1950s. With the widespread use of these diets, the prevalence of conditions related to nutritional deficiencies has been all but eliminated and nearly forgotten. In the modern era, nutritional deficiencies are novel and often justify written case reports or, if due to errors in commercial diets, product recalls. Nevertheless, as concerns about processed foods for
human consumption increase, concerns related to commercial pet foods have emerged. Sometimes these concerns are driven by marketing, sometimes by pet owners’ personal preferences and opinions on healthy foods, and sometimes by social media. Readers are encouraged to review both articles on commercial pet foods for different, evidence-based perspectives that will be of value while addressing your clients’ questions.

An emerging area of importance, due in part to climate change and the ever-increasing human population, is the need for sustainable pet foods. Small animal veterinarians have a central role as an information and guidance resource for clients on diet selection, feeding management, and proper pet waste disposal practices relative to sustainability and impact of pets and pet foods on climate change. If you believe that mankind has any role in climate change, you will want to be informed about the potential role of the veterinary health care team in educating clients and contributing toward a sustainable future.

Two areas of active research in both human and veterinary medicine deal with the microbiome, and with the emerging roles of macrominerals and vitamin D in various health conditions. The gut microbiome, reflecting all of the microorganisms within the gut, plays an important role not only in gut health but also in systemic health as well. The macrominerals, calcium and phosphorus, have received considerable attention in recent years. The excellent review on this subject highlights the role different dietary phosphorus sources may play in renal health, as well as the role of both minerals in urolithiasis. Research with vitamin D, long recognized for its role in calcium metabolism and skeletal health, now indicates that vitamin D may have roles in immune function, enteropathies, and neoplasia. Although it is currently too early to make clinical recommendations relative to these new benefits, veterinarians should be watchful as this research continues.

The balance of this issue provides up-to-date information about the role of nutrition in managing patients with various health issues, or with aging. An interesting message that is fairly consistent across these articles is that nutrition must be tailored to the individual patient, so it is necessary to complete both physical and nutritional evaluations on patients in order to provide the best dietary options.

I would like to thank the contributing authors for volunteering their time and expertise, especially during this particularly trying year of pandemic, wildfires, hurricanes, and social unrest. I hope that all members of veterinary health care teams find this issue to be relevant and helpful.

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