

Looking Out for Our Four-Footed Friends

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

When at least 16 pet dogs and cats died after eating contaminated pet food last April, people started to ask questions. Questions like, how could this happen? Who's watching over the pet food manufacturers? And why don't more things in life make their own gravy?

The answer to the second question came as a surprise to a lot of people: strange as it may sound, it is the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that is charged with regulating Fido's chow.

That seemed slightly odd to those not familiar with the FDA's mandate. After all, why should the same agency that oversees human pharmaceuticals and food products care about what goes into a golden retriever's Gravy Train?

But in fact, sticking its nose in more areas than any one government agency should is the FDA's forte.

If regulating Kibbles 'n Bits and Meow Mix seems like a stretch, consider that the FDA also oversees everything from lip gloss to cell phones to breast pumps to heating pads. The FDA is even in the business of issuing warnings about pet turtles (kids, steer clear of the agency's website if you are trying to talk your parents into buying you an amphibian) and giving insightful and original weight loss advice ("Start by counting calories").

The FDA is, in other words, a jack of all regulatory trades. It professes to know as much about microwaves and nail polish as it does about high blood pressure medication — and it is determined to make sure you don't nuke a frozen pizza, give yourself a manicure, or swallow a life-saving pill without its OK.

That might not be such a big deal if it didn't happen to drive up the cost of said products and deny people in pain the right to risk experimental treatments.

Given those realities, you'd think that if the public were going to make a fuss about this master-of-none agency, it would be of the "focus on your priorities" sort. You know, a kind of libertarian rebel yell, or at the very least, some words of skepticism about the FDA's ability to be an expert in such a ridiculously wide scope of areas. But you would be wrong.

In fact, one of the first things people did once they learned

of the spring's unfortunate dog and cat deaths was demand that the FDA become *more* involved in the regulation of pet foods. "I want to hear how the FDA is going to work to resolve the current crisis and ensure this doesn't happen again," Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) said at the time. He insisted that the agency should start sending inspectors to pet food manufacturing plants. (I kept picturing a brigade of Jack Russell terriers wearing Sherlock Holmes outfits.)

But the likelihood of such Kibble cops discovering a contamination on the small order of last spring's fiasco — which affected less than 2 percent of the pet food supply — is slim to none.

Other critics demanded that the FDA implement more stringent pet food labeling requirements, which would render the packaging of Lassie's food more elaborate than his owner's (a bit of a waste, given most pets' inability to read). Pretty soon, someone's going to insist on an investigation into the matter by a blue ribbon committee of cocker spaniels to combat the FDA's blatant human-centrism.

In the end, you can't fault pet owners for looking for ways to keep their beloved animals safe. We might not all deck our dogs out in Swarovsky crystal collars the way Martha Stewart does, but most humans want to do the best they can by their pets. Still, the idea that 100 percent protection can be achieved for domestic animals by expanding the FDA's power is about as realistic as thinking that there would be no more hurricanes if only FEMA had more funding.

As with the human food supply (remember the recent spinach and carrot juice scares), serious problems with the pet food chain are going to happen. They might be lessened by the threat of lawsuits and bad press (few manufacturers want to be known for offing the family dog). But no government agency, no matter how wide its mandate or how strict its rules, will ever be able to stop such tragedies altogether.

If, on the other hand, pet owners would like to see the cost of filling their animals' food bowls rise (as manufacturers struggle to comply with added regulations) and their choices in kitty treats and birdy num-nums lessened, then by all means, bring on added FDA powers in the realm of pet food. Just don't expect our newly restricted furry friends to be very thankful for the change.



Marni Soupcoff is a member of the *National Post* editorial board and a Toronto-based journalist. She is a former Institute for Justice staff attorney.

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KEVIN TUMA