Dr. G. Knows Why the Dogs Died

Alimentary, Dear Watson. The Case of the Lethal Legumes

July 28, 2018 By Mike Barr

I love a good Whodunnit. All the more when the mystery is medical. I had been boring our new office manager lately with the mine field labyrinth as sketched out over the past 2-3 years by the Bulletproof and Plant Paradox* fellows, so this Most Read item in Thursday's NYT caught my eye.

"Popular Grain-Free Dog Food May Be Linked To Heart Disease," went the alarming title. Oh my, what now? Have the prideful Paleos finally met their comeuppance?

Turns out it's not the meat. Rather, blame seems to rest squarely on the lentils and chickpeas. Damn the dal! Pulses (and peas?) as perpetrators. Yes, it appears, your hound can have too much humus.

Since I kind of live for traditional cooking, I should add that these storied cultures figured out long ago how to de-fang nature's defenses in the food supply, either in how they're prepared or by specific food combinations. Pressure cooking legumes is the simplest way to make them safe (fermenting is the other), but it's unlikely that these $80 a month+ designer dog food companies know, or are going to the trouble, to do that.**

The most credible science guy quoted near the end of the article cites the the low levels of taurine found in many (but not all) of the dogs analyzed.

So named because it was first isolated from the gallbladder of an ox, taurine is an amino acid both ingested and produced (thereby given the moniker "conditional" among the amino acid types) by the body from methionine and cysteine. (You might recognize it as one of the four ingredients in Red Bull.) While heart function does not figure among taurine's top five functions, it is found in high concentrations in muscle (including the muscle that is your heart) and brain tissues. Mercola, for example, lists electrolyte and mineral balance, formation of bile salts, CNS function and macular health. "Mg per kg," as they say, humans are said to have about 1g (1,000 milligrams) of taurine for every 1 kg of body weight.

"Fatigue. Labored breathing. Abdominal distension. Heart failure and fainting." What does this sound like to you? By the time they got to the ER, Bentley had gone into cardiac arrest.

Investigators speculate that legumes may have interfered with the dogs' ability to make taurine--or perhaps absorb it. This sounds like more of a phytate issue than a lectin one, but I guess we'll

have to wait and see where the next clues lead. Phytates are believed to bind key minerals like magnesium and zinc, calcium and iron, preventing their absorption in the digestive tract. (They are also said to inhibit the digestive enzymes pepsin, trypsin and amylase.) Cooking phytate containing legumes well-- and then draining off the water (or soaking them in an acid like lemon or vinegar)-- reduces their phytic acid levels, but many of the other grains and seeds that contain phytates are said to irritate the gut even when cooked.

A veterinary cardiologist at UC Davis, Joshua Stern, is said to be tracking 24 golden retrievers with low taurine levels linked to grain-free diets. Taurine levels in other affected dogs, however, were found to be within the normal range. So the jury is still out as to whether this initial laboratory evidence is a red herring epiphenomenon or actually a helpful clue.

When Bulletproof's Dave Asprey came out with his first book and subsequent Bulletproof Roadmap in 2014, legumes were placed perilously close to his Red Zone: basically 2/3 of the way between "Limit" and "Avoid." Along with his other favorite "anti-nutrients"-- oxalates, phytates and mold toxins-- of the lectins in legumes he writes, "Certain people are more sensitive to specific types of lectins than others. (There are thousands.) And the more of them you eat, the more you risk damaging your body: brain fog, sore joints, bad skin, even migraines are common symptoms. The kind of lectin found in tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, potatoes (Gundry includes goji berries in this group) is believed to be a common autoimmune trigger."

Plant Paradox's Steven Gundry goes into even greater detail, pretty much because his entire book (and now career) is/are dedicated to this topic, dubbing beans, peas, soybeans (think tofu and edamame), lentils and other members of the legume family, the "King of Lectins."

As for the primal dog food companies, there have been no recalls just yet. For now, explains the Times, the FDA has requested that owners and veterinarians collect blood and urine samples from affected dogs, so that more comprehensive analyses and comparisons might be made.

A final note: Even if you haven't learned to trust (or notice) your own better instincts, please learn to trust those of your pet. Bentley shied away from chowing down more of this unhealthful brew because he knew it wasn't good for him. Listen to your dog!

* Sign up for Gundry's newsletter AYOR, I'm warning you. He'll stalk you to the point of seeking a restraining order. Clear your cookies! (No offense, Dr. G. In my state, I should be flattered by the attention. It's just gotten a bit creepy.)

** I have come to believe that just about everything in life, certainly ingesting life, is to one degree or another dose dependent. Somehow eating lentils or chickpeas or just about anything EVERY DAY for your entire life just doesn't seem like a great idea. I began wondering recently where the ingrained idea that one should not disrupt a dog's (or cat's) dietary regime originated. After watching way too many dogs end up in renal failure, prematurely to my mind, I began to pay alot more attention to what was/is in the food of our annoying pooch. And... getting back to that "traditions" stream of thought, my domestic companion astutely observes that back in his "shithole" country (See you in an orange jumper real soon we hope, Donny boy!) where dogs run

stray and subsist pretty much on table scraps, they don’t seem to have any of the chronic health conditions (and live just as long if not longer) that plague rich-world pets. Gets ya to thinkin’... So now, long story long, we rotate a couple of the cleanest ingredient foods and supplement generously with the aforementioned... table scraps. Might that have spared Bentley?

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