

Why do you really need a prescription for your dog's food? ... just follow the money!

By Deb Dempsey

Did you know that the Prescription Diet® (Prescription Diet® is a registered trademark of Hills® Pet Nutrition, Inc.®) your veterinarian prescribed for your dog doesn't really require a prescription in the true sense of the word? I'm willing to bet that most consumers and perhaps even some vets are unaware that there are no special ingredients inside these diets that are regulated by the FDA or DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), requiring an official prescription.



In the dog food world, the term Prescription Diet® describes an effective marketing agreement between a hundred-million dollar pet food manufacturer and the veterinarian community. This agreement allows for the sale of their foods through licensed veterinarians only. Veterinarians benefit because they can achieve a much higher mark-up on these foods than they would by offering foods widely available without a "prescription." The pet food manufacturer, in return, gains credibility as a manufacturer of veterinarian-recommended food and uses that as an endorsement, if you will, for the rest of their products. Win-win, right?

Just to clarify... Scott Ziehr, Feed Program Regulatory Specialist for the Colorado Department of Agriculture, told me that, "No, there are no specific regulations for prescription feeds beyond the regulations in place for commercial animal feed." The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act does require that pet foods, like human foods, be pure and wholesome, contain no harmful or deleterious substances, and be truthfully labeled. When I pressed Mr. Ziehr as to whether he felt these prescription diets were truthfully labeled, he responded that this was "not a question anyone had ever asked before" and that it could be "subject to interpretation." He then referred me to Dr. Sharon Benz, Deputy Director for the Office of Surveillance and Compliance at the CVM (Center for Veterinary Medicine) within the FDA. While I was unable to speak with Dr. Benz, Laura Alvey, Deputy Director, Communications Staff CVM, weighed in with this statement: "Prescription diet is an industry-coined term and holds no legal meaning."

A Brief History of The Prescription Diet ®

Dr. Mark Morris, Sr. created the first "Prescription Diet®" in the late 1930's. Dr. Morris was a Cornell-educated veterinarian who worked with the American Humane Association to develop a meat-free diet, necessary to feed dogs amidst food rationing during World War II. "Pets do not need fresh meat, but can get their protein from rejected eggs, unsalable fish, soybeans, or even sour milk," he explained in his biography, *Mark Morris Veterinarian*, written by Willard Haselbush in 1984 (pg. 88). Once the war ended, many pet food manufacturers began creating diets higher in animal proteins, more in keeping with the dietary needs of carnivores, i.e. meat-eaters. Dr. Morris, however, stuck to his previous formulations, explaining that, "...when I remember in wartime thousands of dogs in this country were kept alive and healthy on diets of cooked cereals and vegetables fortified with soybean meal, the effort to lure the American public into feeding pets an all-meat diet consisting of meat by-products is ridiculous" (Haselbush, 89). Interestingly, many of the Prescription Diets® today contain animal by-products.

Dr. Morris developed a variety of Prescription Diets® including r/d® (r/d® is a registered trademark of Hills® Pet Nutrition, Inc.®), a formula designed to reduce a dog's weight. "These dogs are around the house a lot and are often fed bits of candy and other sweets as a snack or reward. Fatness is a natural result. This presented a real research problem: How to create a diet that would be palatable, fill up the stomach, provide very little real nourishment—and still not create a diet deficiency disease," Dr. Morris lamented in his biography (Haselbush, 144). He found the solution in pulverized cellulose, also known as wood pulp or sawdust, which is still a major ingredient in r/d® today. One has to wonder why he went to the trouble to create a dog food based on sawdust instead of suggesting that the pet owner cut back on the amount of candy they gave their pet.

An informal price survey amongst veterinarians selling 30-pound bags of Prescription Diet® r/d® (weight reduction) found the average price to be \$61.00 or \$2.03/lb. Alternatively, a 40-pound bag of Hills® Science Diet® Adult Light with similar ingredients and guaranteed analysis statements cost \$43.99 or \$1.09/lb. From a layperson's viewpoint, both foods (containing corn, chicken by-products, and cellulose) seem to be used for similar goals, yet the formula available only through licensed veterinarians costs nearly twice as much.

Elaborate Marketing Plans Ensure Veterinary Cooperation

In addition to creating pet food to address specific health issues, Dr. Morris also created a detailed and very successful marketing plan to gain credibility within the veterinary community. His daughter Ruth was hired "to disseminate knowledge about k/d®, p/d® (k/d® and p/d® are registered trademarks of Hills® Pet Nutrition, Inc.®) and the foundation among veterinarians, to encourage a favorable image among them and to develop a whole new area of professional and public relations as it may relate to veterinarians," which was explained in Dr. Morris' biography (Haselbush, 171). With the help of a public relations firm, they created the "Student Agent Program," designed to indoctrinate promising young veterinary medical students to act as liaisons to help educate their young, impressionable classmates about these diets.

Dr. Michael W. Fox, co-author of *Not Fit for a Dog! The Truth About Manufactured Dog and Cat Food*, explained it this way: "Until recently, vet students in the U.S. and other countries were taught cat and dog nutrition by veterinarians employed by pet-food companies. Now more schools have staff teaching a short course in companion animal nutrition, but only too often their research and lectureships are funded by pet food manufacturers."

Surely, Not Every Vet Buys Into This Marketing Strategy

Dr. Paula Terifaj, a holistic veterinarian in Orange County, owner of Founders Veterinary Clinic and author of *How to Feed Your Dog if You Flunked Rocket Science*, recalled being "courted by" pet food companies in vet school: "It was conveyed to us that people are too stupid to cook for themselves," she says. As most veterinarians do, she utilized "Prescription Diets®" in her practice initially. In 1999, however, she had a light bulb moment when she came across a book written by one her favorite professors, Dr. Donald Strombeck, entitled, *Home-Prepared Dog and Cat Diets: The Healthful Alternative*, which is still available today on Amazon.com. His advice set her on a journey that changed her practice forever. Today, Dr. Terifaj operates a holistic practice and encourages her clients to cook for their dogs. She feels that the manufacturer of Prescription Diets® uses "substandard ingredients and then fortifies the hell out of their formulas."

Dr. Judy Jasek, a popular holistic Veterinarian in Englewood, Colorado and owner of Bellevue Animal Clinic, also bought into the Prescription Diet® mantra early on in her career. "It was just the way we were taught," she recalled. "Sales reps were always coming in telling us how wonderful their foods were." As she began to educate herself on nutrition, she slowly began to phase them out of her practice. "Almost all are corn-based and there is no real nutrition in them. They are so highly processed and contain lots of by-products."

Dr. Michael Fox, Veterinarian, author, and former Vice President of the Humane Society of the United States, sums it up: “Vet students and practicing veterinarians alike believe the ‘science’ behind manufactured pet food formulations is sound. But as we (Drs. Fox, Hodgkins and Sharp) show in *Not Fit for a Dog; The Truth About Manufactured Cat and Dog Foods*, the science is seriously flawed and trumped by the bottom line of lowest-cost ingredients and maximizing profitability. Pet owners must realize that manufactured pet foods and the spin-off prescription diets are part of the agribusiness food and drug industrial complex that profits from recycling food and beverage wastes into pet foods and livestock feed, putting animal health and wellbeing at risk in the process...”

A More Natural Approach

So what is a pet owner to do if their dog develops kidney disease, urine crystals, or any other diseases that these diets would normally be prescribed to treat?

Dr. Terifaj first suggests first verifying that the dog does indeed need a special diet. She feels that often times a dog is “on the fence” and the easiest thing for a veterinarian to do is to suggest a Prescription Diet®. Instead, she often turns to a Web site, www.balanceit.com. This Web site provides recipes at a nominal charge to pet owners interesting in cooking their own food. In addition, vets can log in at no charge and request diets designed to treat specific diseases. She suggests asking your vet to do so for you if he or she is adamant about a specific diet. Not only will this be a cheaper alternative, but Dr. Terifaj feels it is a much healthier approach to feed real “human food.”

Dr. Fox also prefers to feed a biologically appropriate, whole-food diet to his patients and offers recipes on his Web site www.twobitdog.com/drfox. He points out that “many of the so-called prescription diets are highly unpalatable and are lacking in essential nutrients. Veterinarian Deva Khalasa, VMD, in her new book *Natural Dog: A Holistic Guide for Healthier Dogs*, has some excellent home-prepared diets for dogs with various chronic ailments from cancer to diabetes.”

If a veterinarian won’t budge from the idea of a Prescription Diet®, it may be time to locate a holistic veterinarian for second opinion. Dr. Jasek is a member of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA) and clients often find her using the vet finder on the group’s web site, www.holisticvetlist.com.

The next time your veterinarian suggests a diet for your four-legged child that you’re not comfortable with, don’t hesitate to ask questions. A good veterinarian, traditional or holistic, will welcome that discussion and encourage you to look at all the options available.

Haselbush, Willard C., *Mark Morris Veterinarian*, R.R.
Donnelley & Sons Company, 1984.

Today, Hills® Pet Nutrition, inc.®, owned by toothpaste giant Colgate-Palmolive®, is involved in widespread marketing efforts designed to reach veterinarians at all stages of their career. This approach is remarkably similar to the marketing efforts in the toothpaste industry, courting and then touting a dentist's endorsement.

Hills® Pet Nutrition, Inc.®...

- offers scholarships for veterinary students
- offers educational grants for veterinary schools
- funds continuing education programs for licensed veterinarians
- maintains the Hills vet school graduate feeding program, providing food to students at no charge that they can resell for a profit
- creates a nutrition curriculum provided to vet schools all over the world
- distributes Small Animal Clinical Nutrition textbook to vet students
- is a sponsor of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), of which Dr. Mark Morris, Sr. was once president
- is a founding sponsor of the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues
- is a founding sponsor of the American Animal Hospital Association, of which Dr. Mark Morris, Sr. was the first president
- sponsors the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine
- sponsors the North American Veterinary Conference
- sponsors the Western Veterinary Conference
- sponsors the Student American Veterinary Medical Association
- sponsors the Veterinary Business Management Association
- sponsors the International Veterinary Student Association
- is a member of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association
- self-professes to be one of the largest employers of veterinarians worldwide
- regularly takes its competitors to court, challenging their marketing claims

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