

The image is impossible to forget: eight beagles lying side by side on a grey floor, raising their heads uncertainly under the fluorescent lights. As the video continues, you hear the din of barks echoing off metal grates, see a hesitant cat huddled in the back of a gloomy cage, and observe a dog under anesthesia for an unknown procedure. You're not sure exactly what you are seeing, but the mood is clear. This is bleak.

That dark and gloomy 9-minute video, shot by an undercover PETA agent in 2002 at the Sinclair Research Center in Missouri, has taken on legendary status in the animal welfare world. With no narrative, save the barking, it's easy to see how damaging the footage could be to the Iams company, one of several pet food manufacturers who were using Sinclair to test the effects of dog and cat kibble on animals in the early 2000s. To this day, Iams deals with queries regarding the video on a daily basis asking the question: Why are you hurting dogs and cats in the name of making pet food?

In the United States, almost any pet food you purchase has an AAFCO statement on the back of the bag or can. The Association of American Feed Control Officials establishes manufacturing models and protocols. In order to ensure that a pet food provides complete and balanced nutrition, the manufacturer must either provide a laboratory analysis showing that it meets AAFCO nutritional profiles, or prove the food is adequate using a feeding trial over a period of months to years.

Small companies rely on the laboratory analysis method to come up with their formulations, as feeding trials are time consuming, costly, and can raise ethical questions. Large brands that can afford the feeding trials prefer to use this method, feeling that it provides better proof of the food's performance in animals. In the early 1990s, Iams conducted research to develop a large breed puppy formula, the first of its kind. The company made its research public so that other pet food manufacturers could use their data to formulate their own large breed puppy formulas. This unofficial partnership has been in place for decades.

Animals used in research have been protected to some extent through the Animal Welfare Act since 1966. The Act, which is enforced by the US Department of Agriculture, stipulates that any institution that uses animals in research or instruction must establish an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), which reviews every protocol for compliance with the Animal Welfare Act. The IACUC is an in-house committee established by the institution performing the research.

While the Animal Welfare Act is intended to provide for the humane care of animals in research environments, many people feel the minimums established therein are inadequate based on our current understanding of animal needs. For example, this is the wording regarding minimum kennel size for dogs: "(the kennel must) Provide sufficient space to allow each dog and cat to turn about freely, to stand, sit, and lie in a comfortable, normal position, and to walk in a normal manner." Many animal

welfare proponents argue that dogs need more space than this to live comfortably and humanely.

The Animal Welfare Act has undergone regular revisions since 1966. In 1985, a major amendment included provisions for exercise of dogs, recognizing the importance of physical activity and stimulation as a basic canine need. Additional amendments in 1994 and 2000 have addressed the cage sizing requirements. While this federal law outlines minimum standards, it is common for an institution's IACUC to expand upon this and require standards above that determined by the AWA.

A decade ago, it was common procedure for a pet food company to contract their research out to a third party, as was the case with Iams and the Sinclair Research Center. Iams provided Sinclair with the protocol they were to implement, and added an animal welfare specialist position to provide exercise, play, and mental stimulation to the study pets. The person hired by Sinclair (?) was secretly a PETA volunteer, who spent nine months filming the center's research, which included pets undergoing spay and neuter procedures, muscle biopsies, and recovering from anesthesia.

The public response to the video when it was released by PETA in 2003 was immediate and intense. Although the procedures were status quo for the industry at the time and fulfilled the legal requirements for animal welfare, it soon became apparent that consumers wanted more for these animals than the minimum requirements. If companies like Iams wanted to keep their business, they needed to change the way research animals are treated. The consensus was clear: they needed to be treated like our own pets.

"While the video was illegal, highly edited and misleading, this situation did help Iams formalize its approach to animal welfare," says Jason Taylor, Procter & Gamble Pet Care's Manager of External Relations. "This led to several interventions, namely the formation of our external Animal Welfare Advisory Board, complete transparency of our animal studies policy, and a decision to assume more control of our feeding trials by limiting the places where we do our studies."

Later that same year, Iams cut ties with Sinclair and opted to bring all of their research to their own facility, the 20 million dollar Iams Pet Health and Nutrition Center in Lewisburg, Ohio. It was the start of a new version of animal research, one that left prison-like images behind to replace it with grassy play areas, sunlight, and real homes.

Over the next several years, Iams created an International Animal Welfare Advisory Board composed of expert consultants in animal welfare and animal use alternatives to come up with a way to maintain feeding trials while satisfying consumer demands for pet-friendly research protocols. With the guidance of the board, Iams developed an Animal Study Policy that encompasses the Three R's of animal

research usage: replacement of animals with non-animal models; reduction in the number of animals used in research; and refinement of current practices to enhance research animal welfare. For example, lab tests have now replaced animal models to evaluate the fermentation process in food breakdown, and simulate the body's ability to utilize a particular protein.

The animal feeding trials of today bear little resemblance to those of a decade ago. Iams had decided as far back as 1999 to end all terminal procedures on dogs and cats. Today, all testing performed on animals must be a procedure that has a human equivalent. For example, blood collection is acceptable, since that is a standard procedure in volunteer human clinical trials. Urine collection via needle, a standard procedure in veterinary offices but not in human medical facilities, is not. Therefore all urine must be collected by the free catch method.

The goal of the feeding trials nowadays is twofold: to make sure a food is safe, and to ensure it is palatable. The latter is demonstrated using a plate split in two, with dual food offerings. Bloodwork, physical examinations, urine and feces are collected and evaluated as a means to assess growth and health. No animals are euthanized as part of the research process. Their "job," if you could call it that, is to eat their preferred food and then go on about the business of being a dog.

Unlike in years past, Iams no longer induces disease in research animals. Instead, if they are looking to test a diet on a pet with a specific medical condition, they recruit pets that live with the disease naturally to participate in a clinical research trial. Iams has a network of veterinary clinics it works with, whose patients try out new diets. Data collection techniques vary depending on the study, according to Taylor. "Sometimes they feed food to their pets, record different variables such as whether the pet liked it, did they eat all of it, etc. and send the data to us," Taylor states. "Other times we partner with local veterinarians and the measurements are taken in the veterinarian's office."

Two thirds of pets in today's feeding trials are owned pets who participate in clinical research trials modeled on the same trial methods used in human medicine. They reside at home with their owners or at facilities where service dogs live and train such as Canine Companions for Independence, try out the food, and report back to Iams about how their pet likes it. The remaining third of the research animals, about 700, reside at the 170-acre Iams Pet Health and Nutrition Center.

A dog who enters the Iams Pet Health and Nutrition Center is provided with a "life plan" from day one. The goal of the program is to have pets live half their life — until about age six — at the Pet Health and Nutrition Center participating in feeding trials, then retire into a private home. Based on feedback from adoptive parents, Iams brought a full time pet behaviorist on board to create a training and socialization program that runs concurrently with the feeding trial process.

“The goals of our training and socialization program are to prepare the dogs and cats for their work at the Pet Health and Nutrition Center,” explains behavior specialist Dr. Jessica Lockhart, “but more importantly prepare them to become adoptable. From puppy and kitten kindergarten to ongoing clicker training, the Home Environment room and basic obedience training, our program aims to create happy, healthy pets that produce accurate data for our feeding trials and then retire to become family pets, living in private homes.”

These techniques were on display during a recent tour, when the Labradors in the kennels sat patiently and quietly while the visitors walked around for a visit. Taylor explained that the dogs had been trained since puppyhood using positive reinforcement techniques not to bark for attention. This quiet environment is helpful for reducing stress in the dogs’ lives at the facility, and the behavior also makes them more attractive when it is time for them to retire.

Dogs are purchased as puppies from local breeders familiar with the program, who are willing to incorporate their training and socialization techniques from birth. The puppies are fostered in homes during a month of the critical early socialization period in order to be exposed to cars, strangers, and the world at large. This early training is considered a key to the dogs’ happiness in the research environment, and one of the main reasons puppies come from breeders as opposed to a shelter. It is also illegal in many jurisdictions to use shelter animals for any research. After that month, they move full time to the Health and Nutrition Center.

The campus itself resembles a high-end boarding facility. Dogs are kenneled according to preference either singly or in pairs, with a kennel that is split between indoors and outdoors so the dog can choose where they would like to spend their time. The metal cages of yesteryear have turned into 150 square foot runs with beds, doors, toys, and windows. Dogs have daily outdoor playtime with pals, exercise equipment, pools, and work with a trainer using positive reinforcement techniques.

When a dog approaches retirement age, they enter a transition phase with their trainer. During this period, they are introduced to a “Home Environment Room” and learn important social cues to assist with entering their adoptive homes: that one cannot jump on the couch, for instance, and how to get used to the sounds of a television, a toilet, or a vacuum.

There is no shortage of local families willing to adopt these dogs at the end of their food-tasting career. A dedicated adoption consultant at the Pet Health and Nutrition Center has the job of placing each dog with a family based on who would make a good match. The majority of the pets are adopted by Iams employees, many of whom live in the Ohio region near the facility. Iams also partners with local shelters and rescue to get the word out to the community, ensuring every retired pet gets a permanent home. The program has proven so popular in the community that there is currently a wait list for available dogs.

Iams is not alone in embracing progressive animal welfare policies. Both the Hills pet food company and Royal Canin, two major players in the pet food industry who also represent a large proportion of the market for prescription veterinary diets, have embraced similar policies for the use of non-invasive testing, alternatives to animal usage, and rejection of terminal studies.

Consumers are more aware than ever before about animal research. They want the best possible products, validated by science, but they also want to feel good about the research methodology behind that science. By recruiting experts in the field of animal welfare and re-building the testing process from the bottom up, pet food companies have made leaps and bounds in animal care policy without sacrificing the quality of their data. With those grey grainy laboratory facility images relegated to the history books, it's finally time to breathe a sigh of relief and feed our pets with a clear conscience.