



THE VOHC SEAL – WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

PURPOSE AND HISTORY OF THE VETERINARY ORAL HEALTH COUNCIL

Back in the 1980s, it was noticed that there was an increasing number of products coming on the market that claimed to help prevent or treat periodontal disease in dogs and cats. Often these claims were made with no scientific support. In order to obtain credibility, manufactures of some of these products would seek the endorsement of veterinarians, veterinary dentists and veterinary dental organizations.

Concerned that the unsubstantiated claims and casual endorsements could lead to a great deal of confusion (and conflicts) in the field, a group of thought-leaders began discussions on devising a method of objectively assessing a product's claims and for fairly recognizing those products deemed efficacious. Over a period of several years and with the sponsorship of the American Veterinary Dental College, under the guiding hand of Dr. Colin Harvey, the Veterinary Oral Health Council began to take shape.

The official launch of the VOHC took place in 1997.

HOW THE VOHC WORKS

If a company has a product that they feel would be of benefit to dogs and/or cats in the control of plaque and/or tartar, they may apply to the VOHC for their Seal of Acceptance. The protocols for application are all available at www.vohc.org.

The VOHC does not perform any research itself. Rather, the manufacture must perform scientific trials based on the VOHC standard protocols (available on the VOHC site). They then submit their report and results to the VOHC who

reviews the data. If the council is satisfied that the protocols were followed and that the results indicate a significant beneficial effect, the product is granted the Seal of Acceptance.

At present there are two designations available. A product may be accepted as helping to control tartar or as helping to control plaque. Products may receive a dual designation if there is credible evidence that they do both.

Visit the VOHC site to see a current list of all accepted items and their designations (plaque and/or tartar control).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VOHC SEAL OF ACCEPTANCE

As I see it, there are two great benefits brought about by the existence of the VOHC.

More Research:

For one thing, as more and more products apply for and receive the Seal of Acceptance, manufacturers will feel increasing pressure to also apply for the seal. This will lead to an increase in the amount of research being done, adding to the body of knowledge in the field of plaque and calculus control in pet dogs and cats.

Easier Interpretation of Claims:

The more immediate benefit from the Seal is that it makes it much easier for practitioners and clients to decide if the claims made on the label or by the sales representative have substantive scientific support.

If the product bears the seal, then you can be assured that valid research has been done according to standardized protocols and that there was a statistically significant benefit derived from the product compared to the negative control.

If there is no VOHC seal, it does not necessarily mean the product is no good, but it does mean that you will have to dig deeper on your own to determine the value of the product to your patients/pets. You will have to do your own review of the research provided to you by the sales representatives. Sometimes getting hold of existing research is a big task in itself. For many products, no such research exists. Even when there are good papers to review, wading through

them can be time consuming and is made easier if the reader has a deep background in periodontal disease – something many general practitioners and virtually every pet owner lack. The VOHC does this work for you so you do not have to.

Finally, we all know results can be skewed by the design of the protocol. Therefore, it is hard to compare one product to another, even if there is a lot of data to assess as it is “apples-to-oranges”. Since the VOHC prescribes standard protocols, we can compare “apples-to-apples”.

VOHC PROTOCOLS

Details of the protocols for research and submissions are available at the VOHC website and are accessible to anyone. Below is a simplified version.

The test item must be run through two separate trials which must differ in at least two of the following four criteria: population of test animals, location of trial, date of trials and principle investigator/scorer.

The populations of test animals should be similar between the two trials with regard to size, head shape and age, though with dogs, different sizes within both populations is encouraged.

During the trial, subjects are to be fed an AAFCO approved control diet appropriate to their life-stage.

The teeth to be scored are prescribed for each species based on their importance, likelihood of accumulating plaque and tartar and likelihood of being present in the mouth of a patient with moderate periodontal disease.

Teeth are scaled and polished on Day-Zero so that they start the trial with plaque and calculus scores of zero. Minimum trial period is 7 days for a plaque claim and 21 days for a tartar claim – longer trials are encouraged.

At the end of the trial period, a trained “blinded” scorer grades the prescribed teeth for plaque and tartar using standardized methods and grading systems.

Results must show a 10% reduction in plaque or tartar (20% for chemical plaque control) in both

trials AND a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in both trials.

CONCLUSION

A 10 or 20% reduction in plaque or tartar alone will not prevent periodontal disease in an animal predisposed to periodontal disease. Therefore, one must be careful to not place too much faith in any product just because it has the VOHC Seal of Acceptance. The prevention and control of periodontal disease in susceptible animals always requires a multi-modal approach (diet, chew-treats, home-care, professional care...). With a vast number of products to choose from, how does one decide which ones to incorporate into the plan?

Understanding periodontal disease, its risk factors and pathogenesis are key to selecting appropriate products. Knowing the mechanism of action of the product is also important but so is knowing if the product actually does what the label claims and that is where the VOHC Seal of Acceptance can be of great help to the busy practitioner.
