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Preliminary results on a survey on BARF diet in dogs

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Introduction. In recent years “biologically appropriate raw food” (BARF) for dogs and cats have become more popular, even if there are recognized risks and concerns associated with this feeding systems (nutritional imbalances, microbial contamination) [1,2]. Few research have been conducted on the beneficial effects of BARF feeding in pet nutrition, which are yet not proven [1]. The aim of the study was to profile dog and owner populations involved in BARF feeding in Italy.

Animals, material and methods. A survey was shared for 2 months via internet, social network and newsletter with owners of dogs practicing BARF feeding. The survey was composed of 87 questions: a first part in order to characterize the owner (i.e. age, instruction level, location) and the dog (i.e. sex, breed, age) and a second part to investigate diet management (timing, feedstuff used, supplements) and the opinion of owners on this kind of diet, with a focus on positive and negative effects observed following BARF diet feeding. Data frequency analysis was done using Chi-square method. Differences were considered for $p < 0.001$.

Results and discussion. A total of 270 questionnaires were collected among dog owners practicing BARF feeding. Most dogs were mongrels (27%) and FCI (Fédération Cynologique Internationale) classified as Group 1 (17%), 2 (13%), 3 (13%), 5 (11%) and 8 (9%). The majority of dogs fed BARF were of medium (45%) and large (42%) size adult dogs (86%), spayed female (36%) and intact male (30%) living in household conditions (98%). Owners were prevalently women (84%) aged between 30 and 65 years old (72%) living in the northern regions of Italy (68%), holding high school (50%) or university degrees (42%), with an annual incoming below €55.000 (74%). Families living with BARF-fed dogs were composed mostly of 1 or 2 adults (70%) and no children (81%). Most owners started BARF feeding less than 3 years ago (69%) because they didn't trust commercial diets (31%), due to health problems following commercial diet feeding (20%) and because it was considered as more natural and respectful of dogs' nature (34%). Owners got informed mostly through magazines, books and other printed sources (23%) as well as internet browsing (36%). Owners reported mostly diarrhoea following BARF diet introduction (86%) and the large majority thought of BARF feeding as being safe (93%). BARF diets were formulated by a nutritionist (28%) and by owners using publications and online tools (39%). Interviewed owners fed mostly exclusively BARF diets (76%), including fruit and vegetables (79%) and with more than one supplement (58%). In 2017, 45.5% of families owning pets had 1 to 2 members [3], 61% of owners were aged between 35 and 65 years old living in the Italian Northern regions and women (68.5%) were prevalently those in charge of pet care. Pet owners have higher educational level (42% high school and 18% university degree) than that of the Italian population and lower than the results found in this survey.

Conclusion. BARF feeding in Italy is being adopted by medium class women with high educational level that have concerns about adequacy of commercial diets to medium and large, both mixed and purebred, dogs nutrition.

References: [1] Freeman et al. (2013) J. Am. Vet. Med. Assoc. 243: 1549-58; [2] van Bree et al. (2018) Vet. Rec 182: 50 [3] ANMVI 2017.