

the CANINE CORNER

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Since the start of the year, three clients of my canine massage and rehabilitation practice have faced poisoning incidents caused by their pets ingesting rat/mice poisons. In the worst of these cases, a young puppy died. I asked myself, ‘how could this happen – and so frequently?’

The answers might surprise you.

By all accounts, 2019 has been a bumper year for pest controllers and rodents alike. The Department of Conservation has called it a ‘mega mast year’ meaning that trees are producing vast quantities of seeds. These seeds are a food source for rodents and so there’s a population explosion of rodents ready to set up residence in homes and businesses.

Add to this that rodenticides are more potent than ever before.

“Rodenticides have changed over the years,” says Peter Barry, Technical Consultant to the Pest Management Association of NZ. Barry has 30 years of experience in the pest management industry. “First generation poisons, which many people knew as warfarin, required the rodent to eat it multiple times before it had an effect.”

The warfarin-style pesticides gave way to more powerful second-generation poisons. These include brodifacoum, cholecalciferol, and diphacinone. “The increased toxicity means that they kill a mouse or rat with a single feed (by causing internal bleeding). The bait is produced in formats that make them highly attractive to the rodents.” A small matchbox length block of bait can easily be chewed in one sitting.

“Professional pest management contractors know to use these poisons in bait stations, which are tamper-proof boxes that contain a rod mechanism inside to hold the bait in place. A solid bottom to the bait station prevents environmental contamination as well.” Bait stations will greatly reduce the access of pets to the poisons, although regular inspection of bait stations is needed. (In Wellington, there have been reports of extremely healthy and large rats destroying bait stations to get to the bait.)

New Zealand is a country of DIY-ers and rodenticides are readily available for you to buy. My nearby big-box hardware store is selling two packets for \$6.00. “People tend not to read the labels on these poisons because they are so easily purchased and it’s also a case of out of sight, out of mind.”

Peter emphasises, “In hard to reach places, like roof spaces or garage corners, it seems so simple to just chuck a block of poison or scatter some pellets. I can tell you that no professional operator should be doing this.”

One of my clients found, upon moving into their newly built house, that the entire roof space had been dusted with a heavy coating of poison; her cat had easy access to this space. “The builder probably thought they were doing the right thing – as rodents can take shelter in these spaces while the house is still being worked on. You can thank readily available retail access and little regulation for that.”

A certified pest management operator must undergo training in the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act to understand the potency of the poisons they are handling and to be trained in their correct use. Tradespeople in other professions as well as homeowners do not need to go through this training.

Clark Ehlers, Acting General Manager for Hazardous Substances and New Organisms at the EPA, says the typical controls that the EPA may apply to a vertebrate toxic agent (as rodenticides are classified) include requirements on bait size and colour, degree of palatability, methods of release, and the inclusion of repellents/attractants.

New Zealand has lax controls over the access and use of rodenticides, a fact that irks the Pest Management Association of NZ. Says Peter, “when the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act came in, rodenticides were specifically left out of the controlled Class 9 substances list.”

Having tried to find information on the safe use of rodenticides at home, you’d have to dig around the EPA’s website in the hope of stumbling across a November 2017 Caution Notice from the EPA:

“We have approved for sale to consumers a range of products designed to kill mice, rats and similar pests around the home. We set controls for the safe use of these products. Over the years, many products have been approved to kill rats and mice, and they contain different active ingredients.

“For that reason, various controls have been specified over the years, according to the nature of each individual product and best practice at the time. We have issued this Caution Notice to outline best practice approaches today.”

Best practice involves hygiene, use of bait stations, ensuring bait isn’t laid in places accessible to companion animals, and rapid clean-up and disposal of carcasses — secondary poisoning by eating a poisoned rodent is a risk. Labels may or may not provide all this information and homeowners would need to be motivated to find more information on the EPA’s or other websites.

Stronger regulation may be on the horizon because, in June 2019, the Ministry of Primary Industries announced a consultation with stakeholders about a reassessment of vertebrate toxic agents which could change requirements for use, labelling and techniques to minimise exposure by ‘non-target animals.’ MPI’s main area of concern is the risk of poison residues in food-producing animals.

In the meantime, dog owners should be familiar with the signs of rodenticide poisoning which can include lethargy, pale gums, coughing, breathing difficulties, a bloody nose or gums and hematomas. Early intervention is key to survival.

If you must use rodenticides in your home, be familiar with all available guidance on safe use and handling, hire a professional if you can, and — regardless of who lays the bait — make sure it is removed once the rodent problem has subsided. 🐾



Bait station (photo courtesy of Ensystex).