

## **Animal Abuse and Family Violence: What Veterinary Professionals Need to Know<sup>1</sup>**

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A decade ago, stories of animal cruelty and human violence attracted little media attention and were not a significant part of American popular culture. There was comparatively little professional interest in the topic outside of the animal care and control community and only limited discussion of the issue within the professions most directly affected by the abuse of animals and its links to other forms of violence- namely mental health, criminal justice and veterinary medicine (Lockwood, 1999).

The situation has changed dramatically in recent years. Serious animal cruelty cases receive national attention in the U.S. and Canada. A recent incident of road rage in California involving a Bichon Frise thrown into traffic by an irate motorist launched a national manhunt and rewards in excess of \$120,000, culminating in a successful conviction and a three year prison sentence for the perpetrator. Many factors are responsible for this shift:

First, there is stronger scientific evidence for the connection between animal cruelty and violence against humans (Arkow, 1992; Lockwood and Ascione, 1998; Ascione and Arkow, 1999; Ascione and Lockwood, 2001). Although much of this literature existed well before 1980, it attracted little attention until popularized by animal advocacy groups, social service workers and growing public fascination with the life histories of violent offenders. Second, public interest in animal cruelty is a natural corollary of growing concern about the overall proliferation of violence in society and a strong movement to find effective tools for identifying victims and perpetrators of violence at the earliest stages of abuse. Finally, interest in the connection has been strengthened by the practical validity of paying attention to the maltreatment of animals when confronting violence. Law-enforcement officers benefit by taking the actions of animal abusers seriously, social workers and mental health professionals get useful information by asking clients about the treatment of family pets and therapists seeking interventions that will build empathy and develop non-violent skills see the benefits of fostering compassion for animals.

Professions other than humane agents and animal care and control workers have begun to take interest in these connections in recent years. Indicators of this change in the mental health and law-enforcement communities are the inclusion of animal cruelty into the diagnostic criteria for Conduct Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the widespread distribution of material on animal cruelty by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (Lockwood, 1989, Ponder and Lockwood, 2001) and substantial inclusion of material on the subject in the Jumpstart training program for newly appointed prosecutors launched in 1998 by the National Association of District Attorneys and the American Prosecutors Research Institute.

Veterinary involvement in the animal cruelty/human violence issue has been comparatively slow to build, but is attracting increasing attention. The topic has been addressed in the veterinary literature sporadically over the last decade, usually by non-veterinarians (Lockwood, 1985; Arkow, 1992; Rollin, 1994; Geisler, 1995; Christy, 1995). This was followed by several first-hand accounts of the treatment of animal injuries associated with suspicions of other ongoing violence or the potential for violence (Butler and Lagoni, 1995; Craig and Loar, 1998). Landau (1999) surveyed the deans of 31 American and Canadian schools of veterinary medicine. Of these, 97% agreed that veterinarians would encounter instances of intentional animal abuse and 63% agreed that veterinary professionals would encounter cases of animal cruelty associated with family violence. Thirty-one percent of deans reported that their schools had a policy requiring reporting suspected animal abuse. Two of these policies have been discussed in the literature (Rollin, 1994; Arkow, 1999). However, based on inquiries received by The Humane Society of the United States, many veterinary students feel that the issue is inadequately addressed in their training. This is consistent with Landau's finding that only 17% of deans reported that students are explicitly made aware of policies on responding to suspected abuse, and her estimate that the average veterinary curriculum spends only eight minutes on the issue of animal cruelty and human violence.

In another survey of small animal practitioners, Sharpe (1999) estimated that the average practitioner saw 5.6 cases of animal abuse per 1,000 patients, with little effect of location in a rural, urban or suburban practice. She reported that only 8% of the 368 respondents felt that they had received adequate training in general abuse prevention and fewer than 44% thought they adequately understood their rights and responsibilities when responding to suspected animal or human abuse.

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point out the importance of veterinary involvement in responding to suspected animal and human abuse, but it is clear that veterinary professionals are uncertain about the role they can and should play. There are several reasons for this:

First, there is no widely agreed upon standard for identifying an injury or other condition in a veterinary patient as being the result of intentional abuse or extreme neglect. In many ways, veterinary professionals are working in an environment similar to that of pediatricians prior to the efforts of Kempe et.al. (1962) to define the battered child syndrome. Several veterinarians have emphasized the need to establish a similar body of data for animals (Munro, 1996,1998,1999; Patronek, 1998; Miller and Zawistowski, 1998). As a result, veterinary involvement in such cases is most common when there is unequivocal evidence of intentional harm.

Second, veterinarians are trained to base diagnostic assessments, in part, on the facts presented to them by their clients, who are generally truthful. They are not prepared to deal with a client history that is intentionally misleading. Also, like their pediatrician counterparts of the 1960's, many veterinarians seem reluctant to believe that a client who intentionally harmed an animal in his or her care would seek medical treatment for these injuries.

Third, when confronted with suspected cases of intentional abuse, and possible abuse of human family members, veterinary professionals may be legitimately concerned about the safety of themselves or their staff if the suspected perpetrator is confronted about these suspicions. At very least, they may have a reasonable fear of losing a client, developing a poor reputation in the community, or facing possible litigation if they act on their suspicions.

Finally, the legal mandates and protections regarding veterinary response to suspected abuse in the U.S. are currently inconsistent and poorly publicized or incorporated into basic or continuing education. The 1996 Animal Welfare Position Statement of the American Veterinary Medical Association states that:

*"The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may have occasion to observe cases of cruelty to animals, animal abuse, or animal neglect as defined by state or local ordinances. When these observations occur, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to the appropriate authorities. Such disclosures may be necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people."*

Currently such reporting of suspected cruelty to animals is specifically required in only a few states, including West Virginia, Minnesota, Louisiana and Alabama. Other states (Arizona, Wisconsin, and California) only mandate veterinarians to report suspected abuse related to dogfighting. Some states (including Idaho, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, California, Arizona) encourage reporting abuse by providing immunity for veterinary professionals who make good-faith reports.

Veterinary mandates to report suspected human abuse are even more fragmented. The growing recognition of the significant overlap of child abuse and cruelty to animals (DeViney et.al, 1983; Davidson, 1998) contributed to interest in cross-training animal care and control professionals to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Such reporting is mandated in California for state humane officers (cruelty investigators) and animal control officers. The mandate for veterinarians in that state is unclear since they are not specifically listed among the mandated professions, but could be construed to be mandated under the general rule for licensed health practitioners. According to the San Francisco Council on Child Abuse (Loar, personal communication), child protection officials do not generally consider veterinarians to be mandated reporters in California and have no records of professional referrals made by such practitioners, nor of any actions taken against a veterinarian for failing to report. Colorado appears to be the only state clearly mandating veterinarians to report child abuse, but *not* cruelty to animals. In 1999, Illinois became the first state to add veterinarians to list of professionals mandated to report suspected abuse, neglect or exploitation of the elderly. This complex landscape is further complicated by the fact that in about half of the states in the U.S., all adults are considered mandated (and protected) reporters of suspected child abuse, regardless of profession.

The association of animal abuse with the dynamic of domestic violence has been well documented (Ascione, 1998). Given the prevalence of domestic violence and the incidence of animal cruelty associated with such abuse, it is virtually certain that most companion animal practitioners have one or more clients whose pets have been injured or killed in the context of spouse abuse. However, unlike the requirements for reporting of suspected animal, child or elder abuse, the legislative assumption in the U.S. has been that victims of domestic violence are capable of disclosing their victimization to authorities and any mandates, when present, are usually limited to medical professionals who gain direct evidence of domestic violence in the direct conduct of their professional responsibilities.

Public support for strong and rapid response to animal cruelty and its associated family violence continues to grow. As of July of 2001, thirty-three states and the District of Columbia have felony provisions in their animal cruelty codes making some forms of intentional abuse punishable by large fines and prison sentences of up to 10 years. This represents a dramatic increase from only five states with such provisions a decade ago. Veterinarians, as key advocates for animals in society, will increasingly be expected to respond to these concerns. Also, as Rollin (1994) notes:

*"... as health care professionals with an obligation to public health and welfare, they must act to ferret out those individuals likely to move from animal abuse to human abuse, particularly child abuse.*

There are many opportunities for veterinary professionals to become active in helping their communities

creatively address the overlapping circles of family and community violence:

- \* Playing a key role in the investigation and documentation of animal cruelty
- \* As expert witnesses in the prosecution of animal cruelty
- \* As sentinels for other forms of societal violence, particularly child abuse, domestic violence and elder abuse
- \* As participants in multi-disciplinary response teams and safe haven programs that provide emergency shelter and care for the pets of victims of domestic violence
- \* As participants and instructors in cross-training with social service and animal care and control professionals on the recognition of animal abuse and neglect
- \* As supporters of and participants in animal-oriented prevention and intervention programs for at-risk populations

Violence affects all of us, either directly as victims or friends or family of victims, or indirectly as citizens who must bear the costs of law-enforcement and social service systems that try to prevent or respond to the interconnected webs of victims and perpetrators. The goal of the humane movement has always been to work at the roots of these problems and to foster an ethic of compassion that extends beyond individual, family, racial, political and species barriers. As professionals who already have extended their interest and concerns in this way, veterinarians are well-suited to play a central role in helping to find creative approaches to address violence in society and provide healing that extends far beyond the animals in their care.

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