



Animal Abuse - What Veterinarians Can Do

What is animal abuse?

Animal abuse includes physical abuse (non-accidental injury), sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and staging animal fights. Physical abuse includes the infliction of injuries or causing unnecessary pain, including inappropriate methods of training. Sexual abuse includes any sexual conduct with animals. Emotional abuse may include repeated or sustained 'mental violence' including withholding social interactions. Neglect is the failure to provide adequate levels of food, water, shelter, and veterinary care to animals, resulting in poor physical condition.

Signs of potential physical abuse (non-accidental injury – NAI)

- The history doesn't correspond with the injuries presented.
- The owner shows lack of concern for injuries.
- There is a delay in seeking veterinary treatment.
- There are behavioural signs, e.g. extreme fear in presence of owner, depression, failure to thrive.
- There are clinical signs, e.g. old healed or untreated wounds, multiple fractures in different bones in various stages of healing, bruising. (Because of the animal's hair coat, bruises are usually more easily detected at necropsy.)

None of the above signs is diagnostic of NAI, nor does the absence of some signs rule out the possibility of abuse.

Educate or report?

Some cases of animal abuse, particularly neglect, may be resolved through client education. See resource #1 below ("Reporting" section) for guidelines on deciding whether to educate or report. When education fails, or intentional abuse is suspected, a report should be filed with the appropriate authorities for investigation. You will need to:

- Provide a written statement describing your findings; this will be considered in the decision whether to prosecute the offender. It is essential to promptly and meticulously document any injuries found, as well as explanations provided by person(s) accompanying the animal. Evidence includes medical records, x-rays, good quality photographs, clinical pathology and necropsy reports, etc.
- Give evidence in court if the case goes to prosecution.

Veterinarians may also be asked to give testimony as expert witnesses in cases of animal abuse.

Mandated reporting of abuse; veterinarian-client confidentiality

Through their provincial animal protection acts, some provinces (e.g., Ontario, Manitoba and Nova Scotia) have made the reporting of suspected animal abuse mandatory for veterinarians. These provincial acts also provide veterinarians immunity from prosecution when reports to humane authorities are made in good faith. Other provinces allow veterinarians to report abuse (i.e. it is not considered a breach of confidentiality). In Quebec it is compulsory to report suspected abuse.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, large animal veterinarians (all government-appointed) are special constables who must report suspected abuse of livestock.

Please contact your provincial regulatory body to find out the regulations regarding reporting of animal abuse in your province, or if you have questions or concerns about reporting.

What if I'm wrong in my assessment of suspected abuse? Can I be sued for defamation?

In those provinces where provincial veterinary legislation *allows* you to report, it may not absolve you from potential liability if the accused person feels that his or her reputation has been compromised and you undertook the allegation in a malicious or false way. There are no physical or behavioural signs that are pathognomonic for animal abuse, although the field of veterinary forensics is rapidly developing. When there is evidence consistent with animal abuse, veterinarians must rely on their professional judgement in reporting suspected abuse to public authorities such as the police or animal welfare agencies. Your assessment must be carefully documented and based upon sound veterinary judgement.

Some provinces (e.g., Alberta, Ontario, Manitoba and Nova Scotia) and some U.S states have dealt with this issue by providing veterinarians and others with immunity from liability with regard to reporting suspected animal abuse. As reporting suspected abuse becomes mandatory, it is important for the veterinary community to seek and obtain this type of immunity from prosecution.

Involve all members of your animal care team

Animal health technologists, animal care attendants, and clinic care personnel should all be aware of the signs of animal abuse. Develop a hospital plan with your staff for managing and following up on cases of suspected animal abuse.

Resources

1. CVMA web site on animal abuse <http://canadianveterinarians.net/animal-abuse.aspx>
2. Sinclair L, Merck M, Lockwood R. Forensic Investigation of Animal Cruelty: A Guide for Veterinary and Law Enforcement Professionals. Humane Society Press, HSUS, 2006; ISBN 0-9748400-6-8

To whom do I report abuse?

Report suspected abuse to your area humane society or SPCA. If the suspected abuse is extremely serious and people may be at risk, call the police. Because of the link between animal and other family violence, it is also suggested that a social service agency that handles suspected cases of child abuse be contacted. For easy reference, complete the blanks below with contact numbers for these organizations, and post near your phone.

Local humane society/SPCA:

Local police:

Social service agency (for suspected child abuse):

The CVMA's Position on Animal Abuse

Position:

The CVMA recognizes that veterinarians are in a position to observe occasions of animal abuse and have a moral obligation to report suspected cases. That obligation has increased with the recognized link between abuse in animals and abuse in people. In return, society has an obligation to support those veterinarians who report in good faith, using their professional judgement.

CVMA recognizes that moral obligation is not legal obligation. Any legal obligation to report abuse, or provision of immunity from prosecution for veterinarians, is the jurisdiction of the provinces.

Background:

Animal abuse includes the active maltreatment, or passive neglect of animals and staged animal fighting. Animal hoarding is neglect on a large scale¹.

Veterinarians are often the first professionals to see an abused animal. Suspected animal abuse cases should be reported to local animal protection agencies. More than the animal may be at risk as studies have documented a link between the abuse of animals and the abuse of people, especially family members (1,2,3). Veterinarians may be able to play an important role in breaking the cycle of family violence by reporting suspected animal abuse.

The CVMA encourages provincial VMAs to lobby their provincial governments to develop legislation to make mandatory the reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians, and to provide immunity to those who do so using their professional judgement and in good faith. Other health professionals who are required to report suspected abuse cases have such protection. Veterinarians deserve similar immunity.

Veterinary schools are encouraged to discuss animal abuse, and the reporting thereof in their curricula, so that graduating veterinarians are better able to recognize the signs of abuse and know the appropriate steps to take in documenting and reporting it.

Resources:

1. Becker F, French L. Making the links: child abuse, animal cruelty, and domestic violence. *Child Abuse Review* 2004;13:399-414
2. Faver CA, Strand EB. Domestic violence and animal cruelty: untangling the web of abuse. *J Social Work Ed* 2003;39 (2):237-253
3. Miller C. Childhood animal cruelty and interpersonal violence. *Clin Psych Rev* 2001;21(5):735-749
4. Olson P, ed. *Recognizing and Reporting Animal Abuse: A Veterinarians' Guide*. Englewood, Colorado: American Humane Association, 1998. 1-800-227-4645.

¹ Typically, an animal hoarder is someone who accumulates a large number of animals that overwhelms the person's ability to provide even minimal standards of care and who fails to acknowledge the deteriorating conditions of the animals and the environment as well as the negative effects on the health and well-being of the hoarder and other household members. Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding