

The behavioural manifestations of animal cruelty / abuse

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Abstract

There has been a close association between humans and animals for thousands of years with dogs being kept as pets for over 15,000 years. Research has shown that although most of the relationships between animals and humans provide some benefits to both parties there have always been recognised problems. The subject of animal abuse / animal cruelty is now increasingly being documented and studied. Some of this abuse may be accidental, even inadvertent, due to misunderstanding or ignorance of animals and their behaviour. However, not all abuse is accidental. Increasingly a correlation between animal abuse, domestic violence and child abuse has been recognised. To date most of the papers have examined the physical manifestations of animal abuse that have been identified with the main emphasis in companion animals (commonly dogs and cats). This introductory paper will cover some of the potential behavioural manifestations that veterinarians should be aware of when confronted by a companion dog or cat that may have been abused. It will also discuss the important role veterinarians have in not only recognising animal abuse but also in prevention.

What is abuse?

To abuse is defined as maltreatment: the physical or psychological maltreatment of a person or animal; or harmful practice: to use wrongly or improperly, to misuse. Synonyms include mistreat, injure, and damage ¹.

These words conjure up horrific pictures of physical injuries, of torture, of mutilation. However, there are other aspects of abuse that are more subtle, less obvious to the casual observer and less apparent on physical examination. Nonetheless these other psychological injuries are just as important, and their effects are both short term and long term.

Background

The physical abuse of humans (children, partners, spouses etc) by humans has been documented for hundreds of years ². Some even note this to be “an accepted part of our culture” ³. However it was not until the early 1960s that it became a documented diagnosis by the medical profession ¹. Child abuse and domestic violence have received increasing attention over the past two to three decades. Now animal abuse is also recognised.

Child abuse and neglect is commonly classified into the following four categories ^{2,4}:

1. Physical abuse (synonyms: non-accidental injury (NAI), battered –child syndrome)
2. Sexual abuse
3. Emotional abuse (which results in the child suffering any kind of significant emotional deprivation or trauma)
4. Neglect (deprivation of the basic necessities of life: food, warmth, shelter, affection).

Recognition is now being given to a fifth category of abuse (or a form of emotional abuse) which is a child's exposure to, or “witnessing” of, domestic violence. This category goes

further than just seeing or hearing violence but includes being hit or threatened while in a mother's arms, and being forced to participate in the disagreement as a tool for spying or psychological pressure⁵.

A clear link between animal abuse, domestic violence and child abuse has been established. Researchers have also linked a history of animal cruelty to serial killings and the recent rash of killings by school-age children. Among the most notorious of those serial killers have been Albert DeSalvo (The Boston Strangler), Theodore Bundy, David Berkowitz (Son of Sam), Jeffrey Dahmer, and Martin Bryant - all with a history of animal torture and killing in their childhood. Five of six students in the USA who went on shooting rampages in 1999 had histories of being cruel to animals in their childhoods⁶.

It is estimated that 88% of animals living in households with domestic violence are either abused or killed. Of all the women in America who enter shelters to escape abuse, 57% have had companion animals killed by the abuser. Neglect of companion animals is thought to be indicative of neglect to children in the family⁶.

Although abuse of animals has long been recognised it is only relatively recently that papers have been presented that document the situation in companion animals. Most of these papers have focused on the physical features of an abused animal (non-accidental injury). The behavioural effects on the animal have only been referred to in passing and the potential long term effects not established².

This link between animal abuse, domestic violence and child abuse means that veterinarians have an important role to play in the community when confronted with an animal presented with a non-accidental injury. This role also extends to animals that may show signs of neglect as well as psychological abuse.

Recognising the signs

The first step in helping abused or neglected animals is learning to recognize the signs of animal abuse and neglect. The presence of a single sign does not prove that the animal has been abused. However, when these signs appear repeatedly, or in combination, the possibility of animal abuse should be considered.

The four recognised categories of child abuse could provide a useful basis on which to classify cases of animal abuse.

1. The identified features of physical non-accidental injury in animals include bruising, burns, lacerations, stab wounds, avulsed nails, conjunctival haemorrhage, epistaxis, haematomas, retinal haemorrhage, fractures, ligament damages, spinal injuries and associated neurologic dysfunction, diaphragmatic rupture, brain trauma and paraplegia.^{2,7,8} Injuries of these types are all relatively commonly seen by veterinarians in practice.

2. Sexually abused animals may present with injuries of the sexual organs, rectum or anus. These can involve lacerations of the organs, ligatures applied to the sexual organs and may involve the use of implements (eg tampons, spoons, broom handles, knives etc.). It should also be noted that as is that case with some sexual abuse in children no obvious visible injury may be observed^{2,8,9}

3. Emotionally abused animals may show similar signs as emotionally abused children. These signs may be fearful behaviour in the presence of their owner, may cower in their presence, have anxiety disorders, present with panic attacks, show extremes in behaviour, such as being overly compliant or extremely demanding, show extreme passivity (learned helplessness), or

aggression¹⁰. It should be noted that as some of these behaviours will not be obvious during a normal veterinary consultation and they may be missed unless specific questions are asked.

4. Neglected animals usually present in a very poor physical condition. They may be emaciated, have external and / or internal parasites, fly blown lesions, faecal matter around the anus and be generally matted and unkempt. The Tufts Animal Care and Condition Scales were developed in 1997 to assist in cases of animal abuse or neglect that are primarily related to husbandry, as opposed to deliberate acts of cruelty¹¹. It should be noted that although the signs of neglect are usually obvious and familiar to all veterinarians in the case of hoarders, for example, these animal may not come to the attention of veterinarians as hoarders do not often present their animal for veterinary care.

Another indicator of possible animal abuse that should also be taken into consideration is the behaviour of the owner/ caregiver. This may include the owner offering conflicting, unconvincing, or even no explanation for the animal's injury, being indifferent to the animal's condition, describing the animal as "evil"¹⁰ or in some other very negative way, using harsh physical discipline, or constantly blaming animal for its mistakes. All of these signs shown by the owner / caregiver of animals are similar to those of parents / caregivers in cases of child abuse¹⁰.

Demographics of Abused animals

In a study conducted in the UK 63% of dogs and 71% of cats that were presented with non-accidental injuries were less than two years of age⁹. The authors propose that this may be caused by the fact that "young animals (like young children) may be less manageable than older animals and therefore provoke the potentially aggressive owner into violence."⁹

The same study showed that 70% of the abused dogs were male but there were no sex differences in abused cats. The authors postulated two possible reasons for this difference. "Potentially violent owners may prefer male dogs or male dogs may be less manageable (or more aggressive) than females again provoking the aggressive owner into violence"⁹.

The Staffordshire bull terrier was at increased risk of NAI in this study and was over-represented compared to the general population. Interestingly the Labrador retriever was at decreased risk of NAI. The authors state that the reasons for these breed differences of risk are unknown at present but "speculate that the Staffordshire bull terrier could be favoured by pugnacious owners"⁹.

Behavioural signs of animal abuse and neglect

The first indication that an animal is unwell is that its behaviour changes. Thus, it would be expected that animals that have been physically and / or emotionally abused would have behavioural changes. The fact that behavioural signs are not commonly reported may indicate the lack of training of veterinarians in behavioural medicine. As veterinarians are not as familiar with behaviour as they are with internal medicine their focus would be on dealing with the physical injuries of the animals that were presented rather than perhaps even recognising some of the less obvious psychological signs.

In a UK study of 243 cases of NAI in dogs and 182 cases of NAI in cats only 7 cases were reported to have behavioural signs⁹. Of the 217 cases of NAI reported in dogs in this study on only 5 occasions were dogs reported with behavioural signs. These were listed as depression, dullness, "psychological damage" and "very timid with humans". Of the 121 cats only 2 were reported with behavioural signs. These signs were listed as "distressed" and fear⁹.

The behavioural signs of animal abuse and neglect are similar to those of abused children. As these animals may not have been socialised correctly, or at all, many of the signs would relate to interactions with con-specifics as well as members of other species. Other signs may include fearful behaviour, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, difficulty with training, sudden changes in behaviour, showing extremes in behaviour, such as being overly compliant (submissive behaviour) or extremely demanding (attention seeking behaviours), showing extreme passivity (learned helplessness), or aggression (impulse control)¹⁰.

Physically abusive behaviour is often justified in the name of discipline for both children and animals. Research suggests, however, that physical discipline is not an effective method of positively influencing children's behaviour.³ The same is true for animals. Furthermore, the use of physical force as a means of discipline has the potential to escalate into much more violent beatings.^{10 12 13}

Emotional abuse does not occur in a single episode but rather is a form of repeated and sustained "mental violence". Such behaviours as rejecting, degrading, terrorizing, isolating, corrupting/exploiting and withholding positive emotional responses are considered forms of emotional abuse in humans^{10 13}. The same could be said for animal abuse.

Discussion

The majority of the abused animals in the UK study were aged 2 years and under⁹. Other research indicates that animals are most commonly surrendered or euthanised prior to one year of age and the average age of dogs and cats around the world is only 3.5 years of age despite their biological potential for living longer^{14 15}. Thus, it may be true that young animals may be more difficult for people to manage. This may be because of unrealistic expectations that owners have of their pets or their lack of understanding of normal animal behaviour.

Social maturity in dogs generally occurs somewhere between 18 months to 30 months of age but varies with the individual and their previous experiences. The most common time for anxiety disorders to become evident in dogs and cats is around 2 years of age. This appears to coincide with the time dogs reach social maturity. Often the owners believe that the animal is deliberately misbehaving or being naughty and do not recognise that the dog has an anxiety disorder. This leads to a break down of the human animal bond and may increase the frustration of the owner and lead to physical and / or emotional abuse.

Many studies have indicated that male dogs are more commonly presented with behaviour problems. Entire males are known to react more quickly to stimuli and stay reactive for longer. This may have been a reason why more male dogs were identified as the subjects of abuse in the UK study.

There are other factors related to domestic violence and child abuse that need to be examined in the context of animal abuse. It has been recognised in cases of child abuse that if the parent / caregiver has a history of childhood maltreatment, alcohol and / or drug addiction, mental illness or has limited education / parenting skills these are risk factors. If the child has a disability or serious behavioural problems this can also be a factor. If the environment includes low socioeconomic status, unemployment and a single-parent family with lack of community support or a feeling of social isolation then the risks are also increased. Similar risk factors may also need to be examined when dealing with animal abuse.

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Punishment is frequently misused by pet owners as they do not understand how it works. Many people believe that punishment infers physical pain, for example, smacking, hitting, kicking. Punishment is not always physical. Withdrawal of something pleasant, for example the ability to interact with people can also act as a punishment. Most people are unaware that this is a form of punishment.

Repeated use of punishment can lead to abuse. Often the punishment is given at a low level, and, over time the animal learns to tolerate it so does not respond to it. This then increases the frustration level of the owner who then increases the level, for example the owner now hits harder. This in turn increases the animal's tolerance. As this cycle is repeated the punishment may turn to abuse. Also what one person perceives as a non-painful smack may indeed be quite painful to another person, or indeed the animal. Additionally, as people are unable to interpret the animal's body language correctly this may also lead to further miscommunication. For example, when some dogs are yelled at they may roll over and urinate. This may increase the owner's frustration, and lead to a more severe reprimand, especially if the initial punishment was meted out for house soiling!

Neglect of companion animals can be indicative of neglect of the children in the family. Officials in the UK and the USA are now trained to observe animals' food and water bowls and other signs of neglect when investigating cases of child neglect. As veterinarians we should also be aware of the link between animal neglect and child neglect.

The role of the veterinarian in the prevention of unintentional animal abuse would appear to be critical. Puppy Preschool® and Kitten Kindy® classes correctly run by well trained veterinary staff can help owners understand and manage their pets better. The role of veterinarians in the education of pet owners through these programmes as well as participating in the Australian Veterinary Association's PetPep is an important one as these programmes teach people to understand and respect animals. This may even help prevent some animal abuse.

In some cases the abuse may be intentional and veterinarians need to be on the look out for animal abuse as there now appears to be a clear link between animal abuse and child or spouse abuse. The kinds of injuries seen, the history of how the animal obtained the injuries, as well as repeated injuries should alert veterinarians to the fact that abuse may be involved. The recognition as well as the prevention of animal abuse is a key role veterinarians can play¹⁶.

Conclusion

Abused animals need care and attention not only for their physical injuries but also for their psychological injuries. These wounds may take months or years to heal or in fact leave a permanent scar. As veterinarians we have a moral and ethical obligation to be concerned for the welfare of the animals under our care and this includes looking after not only their physical well being but just as importantly, their emotional well being. As veterinarians we have an important function not only in the recognition of animal abuse but also in prevention of animal abuse by taking a leading role in educating our clients.

Together with the police, law enforcement officials, victim service providers, doctors, mental health providers, and child/adult protective service officials, animal control officers veterinarians can help to protect not only the animals but also the children and others in our community.

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