

Commentary

The veterinarian's responsibility to recognize and report animal abuse

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Recently, social worker Lynn Loar and her dog were waiting their turn to see the veterinarian when a couple, their 21-month-old daughter, and their 13-week-old unaltered male Presa Canario puppy arrived. The puppy, being large and adorable, attracted a lot of attention, and its owners were very happy to talk about it. It was named Rocko, and the veterinary appointment was not for neutering. Their toddler was jabbing at, rather than petting, Loar's five-year-old spayed mixed-breed dog, and she shuddered to think of what fate might befall this small child. Let us hasten to add that this veterinary practice is about 15 miles from the San Francisco apartment where two Presa Canarios killed Diane Whipple in a ferocious and much publicized attack in 2001 and roughly the same distance from the San Francisco home where a family's unaltered pit bull-type dogs killed 12-year-old Nicholas Faibish in 2007. Ironically, during this visit to the veterinarian's office, a jury was deliberating the felony and misdemeanor charges lodged against Faibish's mother for leaving him home alone with the dogs.

Veterinarians know the importance of pets in the lives of children, times when kids feel alone and misunderstood and seek solace in the affectionate and accepting company of their pet. Somewhere in their education, veterinarians probably came across the facts that serial killers often start their careers by torturing or killing animals and perhaps that most schoolyard shooters have similar, and similarly horrifying, histories.¹ Some veterinarians may also know about the link between animal abuse and domestic violence, that batterers may use pets as weapons to control their partners, and that abuse-reactive children may even aggress against the pet they love.^{2,3}

Despite their familiarity with the human-animal bond and the abuse of animals in violent homes (and all the animal cop shows on the Animal Planet chan-

nel), few veterinarians appreciate the role that pets play in troubled families, much less how to intervene responsibly with at-risk families and their pets. Fewer still know what to do and what their legal responsibilities are when they suspect a child's safety might be at risk from the combination of an inattentive or under-reacting parent and a potentially aggressive dog. And because few veterinarians make house calls, they are not able to see the conditions in the home.

This very limited view means that veterinarians may be providing basic care to animals that pose a danger to children in the home or may be unintentionally abetting a batterer who gives pets as gifts and then kills or gets rid of them time after time as a power play. How many veterinarians ask about the number of pets the family has had and how they have fared over time? Or, more to the point, how the pets came into and left the home? And who would feel comfortable asking about feces and urine in the home?⁴

What is a veterinarian's responsibility in potentially dangerous situations? Doctors, nurses, and other health-care and mental health-care providers with human patients are required to override confidentiality to report suspected abuse or neglect of minors (children under 18), dependent adults (disabled people between 18 and 64), and elders (people 65 and older). In some states, they must also report suspected domestic violence. Therapists have a duty to override confidentiality to warn identifiable victims and law enforcement about serious threats of harm. Should a veterinarian report indications of serious risk (eg, the Presa Canario, toddler, and questionable parents or unaltered pit bull-type dogs with a history of biting left alone with impulsive kids after school)? To whom should veterinarians report such concerns—animal control, the police, or child protective services? In this commentary, we provide recommendations for veterinarians to assess risk in families with animals as well as describe the role veterinarians can have in recognizing and reporting abuse and neglect of animals and people. We also include the AVMA's and the American Animal Hospital Association's positions and recommendations on veterinarians' responsibilities regarding animal abuse and neglect.

Why Animal Abuse and Neglect Should Be Taken Seriously and Reported

Animal cruelty encompasses a range of behaviors harmful to animals, from unintentional neglect to malicious killing. Animals suffer and feel pain, and they

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deserve protection from abuse and neglect in their own right. Additionally, animal abuse and neglect do not occur in a vacuum but are part of a pattern of dangerous and antisocial behavior jeopardizing people, animals, and inanimate property.² Therefore, in the interests of protecting an animal currently receiving treatment from a veterinarian and preventing the dangerous or negligent owner from harming other animals, his or her children, spouse, aging parents, and the community at large, we strongly believe that veterinarians should report animal abuse and neglect to their local animal-control agency and encourage investigation and prosecution of these cases.

The Role Pets Play in Families

Approximately three quarters of American families with children own pets.⁵ Functional and dysfunctional families own pets at the same rate but with one important difference, that being the age of the pets. If you walk into a home with a six-year-old dog lounging on the carpet (or the couch) or a nine-year-old cat sunning itself in the window, your sense of risk should go down. Their owners are stable enough to have maintained those pets over time. On the other hand, if you walk into a home with young animals, your sense of risk should increase, not just because of the greater demands young animals make but also because they tend to come and go quickly in troubled families. If you made a monthly home visit, you would always see puppies and kittens but not the same ones and rarely any animals over the age of two or three years.³ In functional families, adopting an animal is a lifelong commitment and pets grow and age in security and safety. Unfortunately, in dysfunctional families, the parade of beloved yet disposable animals teaches children the risk of attaching and, because of their ready identification with the pet, makes them aware of their own precarious position in the family. Thus, an immediate indicator of family functioning may be the age and number of pets in a home.

A veterinarian may not see the chaos in the client's residence but could certainly note the number of animals the client brings in for care and ask about other animals in the home. All you have to do to get at this crucial information is say, "Tell me about the animals you've had." Here is how two fifth graders in a humane education class responded^{3,6}:

- One stated, "FooFoo got hit by a car. I cried. Cream, my dog, born with a bad hip, got put to sleep. I cried. The rat's teeth overlapped. She got put to sleep. My ferret died. All my animals die. 3 dogs, 7 cats, 10 fish, 1 bird."
- The other stated, "I had too many pets that died. I really don't want to write about it. I can't tell you about them either. I just don't want to. It makes me too sad. The door closed. Don't ask me anymore. I will cry into the ocean."

Parents and caregivers may abuse or threaten to abuse an animal to control a child. Common examples include exacting compliance with a rule or goal by mistreating or threatening the welfare of an animal. Rooms get cleaned and noise is kept down because a

child wants to spare a beloved pet. Children also report those parents threaten to kill or dispose of their pet if the child tells an outsider of the abuse in the home.⁷ Batterers threaten, injure, or kill pets to prevent their partner's leaving.⁸⁻¹⁰ Neglecting households may not only fail to provide adequate food and medical care to their human and nonhuman members but also be filled with animal waste—and even dying and dead animals.^{11,12} Worse still, abusers may give the pet as a gift to buy their victim's silence. Ask your clients how the pets come into the home as well as how they leave. You might learn that your minor client's birthday gift was a puppy to keep him or her from speaking about abuse by a molesting parent, who may tell the child: "I love you so much and in such a special way that I've brought you this puppy. But, don't tell anybody about our special time together if you want to keep the puppy." The child will then experience concerned inquiries from a well-meaning teacher, social worker, or therapist as a threat and have to choose between help for him- or herself and the beloved puppy's life. Or, a victim of domestic violence, wearing long sleeves, a turtleneck, and a lot of makeup despite the warm weather, may bring her anniversary-gift kitten in for vaccinations. What preceded the veterinary appointment was something like this: "Honey, I'm so sorry I hit you. I don't know what came over me. I'll never do it again if you promise not to leave me. To show you how much I love you and want us to stay together, I've brought you this kitten. We'll love it and take care of it together." So, all the hopes for the future of the relationship lie with the kitten's survival, making it hard for the human victim to leave, harder still if leaving means leaving the animal behind. A veterinarian's question about an animal's safety and welfare and surrounding domestic violence is more likely to elicit an honest answer than a similar question posed by a police officer or emergency room physician.

Family-Based Risk Assessment

How often do veterinarians initiate talks about how owners discipline their pets, handle housebreaking problems, deal with annoying behaviors, or ask whether children and pets are together without adult supervision? Veterinarians may not realize this, but most parents (more than 90% according to Straus¹³) spank their children as part of routine discipline, especially when their children are toddlers and preschoolers. What makes the terrible twos so terrible and so apt to elicit abusive behaviors is the confluence of a number of trying and seemingly contradictory factors:

- The child may be highly mobile, relentlessly energetic, and need constant supervision.
- The child may be noisy, crying or whining frequently, or banging things while playing.
- The child may be demanding, resistant, defiant, or disobedient.
- The child may damage or break things or make a mess.
- Power struggles may develop over eating and other matters of self-care.
- The child is not yet toilet trained.

This combination of energy (the child's mobility, demands, and resistance) and vulnerability (still in diapers and needing constant supervision) too often pushes parents beyond their limits. Throughout childhood, this mixture of active, oppositional, and messy behaviors puts children at risk of maltreatment by their parents and other providers of care.

Animal abuse tends to be triggered by many of the same behaviors as child abuse.^{3,7} A cute puppy is also a busy and energetic puppy needing supervision and activity. Animals bark and howl, especially when ignored or left alone too much. They may also be destructive, chewing, digging, and jumping on furniture or people. They eat food left on tables or counters and may turn away from their own rations. Housebreaking problems are common triggers for abuse.

Elder abuse and abuse of people with disabilities stem from some of the same factors. Limited activity may lead to boredom, frustration, complaining, and other irritating behaviors, and these may create emotional and physical stress for caregivers. People wanting to do things their own way, no matter how long it takes, may be perceived as demanding, disobedient, and defiant to caregivers and trigger frustrated and angry responses. Incontinence is often the last straw that brings on abuse.^{3,7}

Comparable behaviors can place children, elders, dependent adults, and animals at risk. Among these behaviors are the following: the need for care and supervision; the level of activity involved in their care; noise (crying, whining, barking, and complaining); resistant, oppositional, defiant, or irascible behavior; eating forbidden food, refusing to eat, or being a picky eater; damaging, breaking, or chewing treasured objects; and toileting accidents. These are normal, albeit trying, behaviors. Problems stem from the limitations of the parents or caregivers in meeting these demands and the stressful circumstances of their lives. Intervention needs to address the potential for neglect or abuse resulting from the limitations of the person in charge and environmental stressors.

Neglect, the failure to provide minimally adequate food, shelter, clothing (for people), medical care, and supervision, poses a serious risk for all dependent living creatures. Unable to ensure their own safety, hygiene, or dietary needs, they suffer and are frightened when those they depend on fail them. Attempts to meet their own needs can create dangerous situations, such as digging or climbing out of a fenced yard and getting run over by a passing car, eating poisonous substances when hungry or unsupervised, and falling and injuring oneself in an attempt to find food, activity, companionship, or a place to eliminate. In extreme circumstances, this neglect can take the form of animal hoarding with a considerable number of animals suffering in deplorable conditions and posing health and safety risks to all living beings in the home.^{11,12}

All dependent living creatures have basic physical and social needs, and the expression of these needs requires patience and protective responses by those providing care and supervision. Risks to potential victims increase when demands are high or resources and skills of the caregiver are low. Assessments must concentrate

on the capabilities of and demands on the parent or caregiver and consider attitudes that can indicate risk (eg, disposability ["It's only a dog"], minimization ["She'll be all right; I had it much worse when I was a kid"], rationalization ["He won't learn any other way"], and justification ["She wet her pants because she is lazy"]). Ignoring the cruelty or neglect of an animal by a pet owner allows the maltreatment of not only the animal but also additional animals the person may acquire to continue unchecked. It also puts humans who exhibit comparable behaviors and make similar demands on the caregiver at risk.

Effective Responses to Violent or Negligent Behaviors

Animal abuse or neglect is a human behavior problem. This same behavior can compromise the safety of all potential victims. Removing one victim may only cause the targets to rotate, thereby increasing the risk for other potential victims in the family or neighborhood. Therefore, we believe it is essential that animal-control and humane society officers be part of the intervention team and that the impact of intervention to protect one victim or category of victim be considered in context of the other potential victims in the home.⁷

In our opinion, collaborative responses involving child and adult protective services, veterinarians, and animal-control and state humane officers along with law enforcement are essential to ensure an appropriate and comprehensive array of protective measures and services. In California, state humane and animal-control officers are mandated to report child, dependent adult, and elder abuse. Veterinarians in California and Colorado are mandated to report suspected child abuse. In California and an increasing number of states, people convicted of cruelty to or neglect of animals are required to participate in counseling as part of their probation or parole.¹⁴

Collaborations Between Battered Women's Shelters and Animal Shelters

Research has consistently shown that women delay entering a battered women's shelter because they cannot bring their pets with them and cannot safely leave them at home.⁹⁻¹¹ Throughout the country, safe pets programs sponsored by humane societies and municipal animal-care and -control agencies provide a few weeks of shelter for the animal to give the woman and her children time to come up with an alternative for the animal without having to worry about its immediate safety and care.

The Veterinarian's Role

The AVMA recognizes the responsibility of the veterinarian to report suspected cases of animal abuse, cruelty, and neglect to the appropriate authorities.¹⁵ An excerpt from the AVMA Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics¹⁵ reads as follows: "Veterinarians and their associates should protect the personal privacy of patients and clients. Veterinarians should not reveal confidences unless required to by law or unless

it becomes necessary to protect the health and welfare of other individuals or animals.” The AVMA Position Statement on Animal Abuse and Animal Neglect¹⁵ reads as follows:

The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may observe cases of animal abuse or neglect as defined by federal or state laws or local ordinances. When these situations cannot be resolved by education, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities. Disclosure may be necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people. Veterinarians should be aware that accurate record keeping and documentation of these cases are invaluable.¹⁵

The American Animal Hospital Association goes even further. An excerpt from the American Animal Hospital Association Position Statement on Animal Abuse¹⁶ reads as follows:

In order to encourage veterinarians and practice team members to be responsible leaders in their communities and to assist in the detection and reporting of animal abuse, the profession should educate its members to recognize, document, and report animal abuse, develop forensic models, promote legislation concerning reporting by veterinarians and collaborate with other animal and humane welfare groups and professionals within communities to eliminate the incidence of animal abuse.

Veterinarians Do See Animal Abuse Cases

Veterinarians tend to think that abusive pet owners do not take their pets to the veterinarian and therefore think that they do not see abused pets in their practices. However, Landau¹⁷ found that 87% of veterinarians responding to a survey had treated abused patients, with half seeing one to three cases per year. DeViney et al¹⁸ found that in pet-owning households with a history of child abuse, use of veterinary services was consistent with norms in non-abusive situations.

The Role of Veterinarians in Animal Abuse Cases

When veterinarians report their reasonable suspicions of abuse or neglect of animals or people to the appropriate protective agency, they provide protection for human and animal members of the household, facilitate the possibility of earlier intervention, and uphold the veterinary oath to prevent suffering. Veterinarians may have many vital roles in cases brought to the attention of authorities, including the following:

- Recognizing and reporting suspected cases of animal abuse.
- Acting as medical experts.
- Assisting at crime scene investigations.
- Collecting and documenting evidence.
- Testifying as expert witnesses in court.
- Recognizing suspected abuse and neglect of family members and reporting to appropriate authorities.

Veterinarians should also familiarize themselves with their reporting responsibilities and the resources available to their clients in their county. All states have laws addressing the responsibilities of pet owners and the mandated reporting roles of various professions. Who receives the reports and who enforces animal cruelty laws (eg, police or county sheriffs, animal-care and -control agencies, nonprofit humane organizations, and state departments of agriculture) vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Veterinarians may not consider these responsibilities because they erroneously believe they do not see evidence of animal abuse in their practice and because they worry that they will put their business at risk by scaring off other pet owners if they report suspected abuse. But if this were true, it would mean that most of the veterinarian's client base was abusive and wary of being reported by the veterinarian. In addition, many veterinarians mistakenly believe that they must assume the roles of investigator, prosecutor, judge, and jury if they report a case of possible abuse. It is important to make clear that reporting is only the first step in the thorough evaluation of a case and that other experts such as law enforcement, humane investigators, and members of the legal system will have equally important roles in the evaluation of a case. The report, in and of itself, will not necessarily lead to a prosecution or conviction. Especially in neglect cases in which the animal's life is not in imminent danger, reporting may allow the investigating agency the opportunity to educate pet owners about proper and legally required care for their animal.¹⁴

Several states, including Arizona, California, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Oregon, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, require veterinarians to report animal abuse or fighting.¹⁴ Some states include veterinarians in their mandate that all licensed health-care providers report child and elder or dependent adult abuse and neglect. Reporting laws are two-pronged: they require certain professionals to report reasonable suspicions of abuse and neglect and they provide immunity for mandated reporters. Animals are owned by humans, and the omissive or commissive behavior that threatens their safety and welfare could just as readily put children, dependent adults, battered spouses, and frail elders at risk. By training and expertise, veterinarians are on a par with other mandated professionals. They should forthrightly join the health-care team by accepting this responsibility.

How Veterinarians Should Proceed

Veterinarians should proceed as follows:

- Acquire a working knowledge of applicable laws pertaining to animal cruelty in their state, county, and community.
- Know which agency in their jurisdiction is responsible for enforcement of animal cruelty laws and develop a working relationship with that agency.
- Establish policies and procedures for recognizing and reporting abuse and provide training for all employees.

Recognizing Abuse: Warning Signs

Some key points for veterinarians and their staffs to watch for include the following:

- Client misrepresents circumstances surrounding a nonaccidental injury; the nature of the injuries is not consistent with the stated cause.
- Client lacks knowledge or concern about previous pets.
- Client is indifferent about current pet's injuries.
- Client fails repeatedly to treat clearly painful or life-threatening conditions.
- Client is wearing heavy makeup, long sleeves, a turtleneck shirt, and perhaps dark glasses when presenting an animal with likely inflicted injuries.
- Animal has severe signs of neglect, such as matted, filthy fur or overgrown or avulsed nails.
- Animal has heavy ectoparasite infestations.
- Animal is thin or emaciated with no apparent contributing or predisposing factors.
- Animal has chronic, untreated medical conditions.
- Client uses the services of several veterinarians.
- Client has multiple injured animals.
- Client has substance-abuse problem.
- Environment has poor sanitation, poor ventilation, poor lighting, or odor of feces or urine.
- Patients are young (puppies and kittens are at greater risk of abuse).
- Patient is an unaltered male (male dogs are at greater risk of abuse).¹⁹
- Patient is rescued by or known to animal-control authorities.
- Client reveals information about cruelty or neglect.
- Veterinarian is a firsthand witness to cruelty or neglect.

Recognizing Abuse: History

Veterinarians should ask people about their experiences with animals routinely and inquire about disciplining, housebreaking, and other triggers. They may learn about family dynamics and values and possibly about abusive and negligent people who pose a danger to others. Risk assessments are most accurate when they compare triggering behaviors of living creatures in the home and their match or mismatch with the potential abuser's ability to tolerate and respond appropriately to them.

Some helpful tips include the following²⁰:

- Compare the stated history to the injuries found in the examination. Are they consistent?
- If a technician took a history before you saw the client, compare the two histories (clients may be more truthful with technicians and receptionists).
- Listen carefully to children, especially younger ones.
- Observe the interaction of family members (eg, look for bruises and signs of fear).
- Accidental injuries are usually admitted, while intentional ones are blamed on unknown causes (eg, intentional burn injuries may be attributable to scalding water, cigarette burns, or from an animal being in the dryer).

Questions to ask include the following:

- What are the conditions of other animals in the household?
- What happened to the other pets?
- Has the animal ever been treated before for other injuries? Who performed the treatment?
- What are the animal's behavior problems?
- Who has access to the animal?

In regard to reporting, veterinarians should observe the following²⁰:

- Immediately report suspected animal cruelty to your municipal animal-control agency or humane society, before the animal's condition changes or alibis are fabricated.
- Allow law enforcement personnel to confiscate the animal before the animal is lost or killed.
- Report even if it is the first time you have ever seen the client. Other veterinarians may have also seen and reported suspected abuse by this client. It may take several reports for an actionable pattern to emerge.
- Report neglect, especially recurrent episodes involving subsequent animals or noncompliance with the same animal (these are signs of a hoarder).

We believe it is important that appropriate authorities investigate and prosecute cases of animal abuse and neglect for the benefit of our animal patients, their owners, and for society as a whole. And, it is important that veterinarians educate themselves and participate in this interdisciplinary process of making communities safer for all living beings. Veterinarians have a key role to play in this process because of the following:

- Animals have the legal status of property. Investigators of animal abuse cases gain access more easily and at lower thresholds than child and elder abuse investigators, whose hands are often tied by the constraints of confidentiality and family privacy and preservation.
- Animal abuse and neglect may be indicators of other forms of abuse and neglect; the animal's distress is often more visible because the animal goes outdoors, and this visibility allows intervention to begin earlier, making it safer for all humans and animals involved.
- Information gathered in an animal abuse case can be relevant in deciding the disposition of child abuse and neglect, dependent adult and elder abuse and neglect, and domestic violence cases.

The successful resolution of an animal abuse or neglect case is frequently not an arrest and prosecution. Often, appropriate client education can resolve cases of inadvertent neglect. We believe it is imperative that veterinarians learn to recognize, report, and document abuse and neglect and to work closely with investigators, prosecutors, humane societies, and human service agencies to protect both animals and people from harm.

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