

# **The Veterinarian's Role in Handling Animal Abuse**

## ***Beforehand***

### **1. Know the Law**

- State and local animal laws- licensing, nuisance, pooper scooper, etc
- State Anti Cruelty Statute
  - How is cruelty defined?
- Veterinary Practice Act
  - Does the state mandate veterinarians to report animal abuse/fighting?
  - Does the state provide immunity for good faith reporting?

### **2. Determine which agency investigates animal abuse**

- Animal Control
- Police Department
- Humane Society

### **3. Establish contacts**

- Law enforcement
- District attorney's office
- Humane society/animal control
- Social services (domestic violence, child protection, elder services)
- Department of Health (hoarding)
- Diagnostic laboratory
- Medical Examiner
- Specialists who will work on abuse cases-radiologists, pathologists, etc
- Local veterinary medical association

### **3. Establish an in-house hospital policy regarding reporting animal abuse that**

- describes circumstances that may be suggestive of animal cruelty
- outlines appropriate procedures for acting on such suspicions

### **4. Provide training and information on recognizing animal abuse for staff**

## ***Confronting suspected animal abuse***

### **1. Gather as much information as possible in a non-confrontational manner**

- How did this happen? When did this happen? Who was involved?
- Does the history make sense? Do the injuries match the history?
- Does the animal have behavioral problems?
- Bite history?

### **2. Decide whether to educate or report**

- Look at the number of problems, severity and duration
- Review medical records of client's other animals
- Review medical record of this patient for previous injuries
- Assess the attitude of the client-indifferent? concerned?
- Evaluate appearance and attitude of family members, friends
- Implement procedures for follow up on questionable cases

### *Some Warning Signs of Abuse and Neglect*

- 1. Injuries that could not logically have occurred in the manner that the owner has described, or discrepancies in the description of how injuries occurred from varying family members, especially children**
- 2. Lack of concern about the disposition of previous pets or constantly changing parade of animals**
- 3. Lack of concern about their (in)ability to care for animals, including repeated refusal to either acknowledge the seriousness of a condition or provide treatment for clearly painful conditions, such as a fracture**
- 4. Indifference to or lack of awareness or concern about how the animal was injured**
- 5. Repeated failure to follow-up on the treatment of serious medical conditions that cause suffering.**
- 6. Use of several veterinarians to cover one's trail of abuse and neglect**
- 7. Obvious signs of neglect-severely matted hair, overgrown nails, emaciation, heavy ectoparasite infestation**
- 8. Behavioral problems including aggression-young male animals appear to be at most risk, especially dominant breeds such as Pitbulls, Rottweillers**

### *Reporting and investigating suspected animal abuse*

- 1. Contact the appropriate authorities**
- 2. Work closely with the investigators, including crime scene investigation**
- 3. Preserve and document the evidence (see below)**
  - Perform a complete physical examination (or necropsy)
  - Obtain a detailed history
  - Perform CBC, chemistry panel, fecal, urinalysis, etc

- Take whole body radiographs to look for fractures in various stages of healing
  - **Please be aware that veterinarians are not permitted to hold animals or perform treatments without owner consent. Diagnostics should be performed as would be necessary to work up any case, and then expanded. (For example, you can obtain permission to perform radiographs and then take whole body radiographs as well to rule out abuse.)**
4. **Maintain the chain of custody of the evidence**
    - Notify laboratories and other consultants in writing that this is a forensics investigation
    - Know the location of the evidence at all times (including the patient)
  5. **Take lots of pictures and label appropriately**
  6. **Maintain thorough, legible medical records as legal documents throughout the treatment period (do not use white out or erase entries)**
  7. **Store records securely. Trials may take place 1-2 years after the actual case is seen**
  8. **Prepare preliminary and final reports for law enforcement**
  9. **Work with attorneys to prepare testimony**

### *Key Points About Animal Abuse*

- **Most cases of animal abuse and neglect can be handled through client education. When education fails, a report should be filed with the appropriate authorities for investigation. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions still do not handle animal abuse seriously.**
- **Good faith reporting of animal abuse means filing a report of a suspicion of animal abuse based on the examination of the patient. It launches an investigation to uncover the facts surrounding the injury or condition. A report that does not lead to charges may still have a positive effect on the situation.**
- **Animal cruelty is defined by statute, not the veterinarian. The role of the veterinarian in investigating animal cruelty is to serve as the medical expert. This role is expanding to include crime scene investigation**
- **Animal abuse is closely linked with human violence, including domestic violence, spousal, child and elder abuse. Veterinarians have an important role**

**to play in keeping animals and humans safe from violence. To this end, ties should be established with other agencies for cross reporting, training, and provision of services.**

**For more information about animal cruelty, please contact the ASPCA  
[www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org) or [lilam@aspca.org](mailto:lilam@aspca.org)**