Effective veterinary response to animal abuse

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Animal abuse is an important social issue affecting animals, families and communities. Both to protect an animal victim and because the abuse may be a sentinel for other violence that is occurring within or outside the family, it is crucial that veterinarians deal effectively with instances of suspected animal maltreatment.

BEFOREHAND
1. Know the laws on animal protection, both national and local.
2. Know to whom abuse should be reported – generally the local humane authority (SPCA, animal control, humane society).
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5. Develop a follow-up strategy for cases that are not reported (e.g., neglected pets).
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7. Discuss in your practice signs that may indicate abuse or neglect

ADDRESSING SUSPECTED ABUSE

Some cases, particularly of neglect, may be handled through client education, or cases of illness or injury that are vaguely suspicious). Designate a staff member to determine if veterinary recommendations are followed – for rechecks, improved husbandry, etc.

SUSPICIOUS INJURIES

In deciding whether to educate or report, consider:
- the number of problems, their duration and severity
- the history – does it make sense in light of the injuries?
- previous medical records for this patient, or for any other animals of this client
- the client’s attitude, concerned, or indifferent
- attitudes of, or comments by, other family members

RECOGNIZING ABUSE

Animal abuse includes physical (non-accidental injury), sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, and staged animal fights. The majority of abuse arises from neglect. Suspicions are generally raised by a combination of factors. No single feature is diagnostic of abuse.

Some warning signs of abuse and neglect

1. History
   - vague or doesn’t fit with the injuries
   - client appears unconcerned
   - children or adults give conflicting information about how the injuries occurred, or the story may change over time (disruptant history)
   - history of previous pets with suspicious injuries, or that died or disappeared at a young age (< 2 years)

2. Suspicious injuries
   - unexplained traumatic injuries
   - multiple fractures, especially in different stages of healing
   - bruising (may only be detected by shaving or, on necropsy, under the skin)
   - repeated injuries – old healed or untreated wounds, may be in various stages of healing (typical in breeds used for dog fighting)
   - eye injuries, especially subconjunctival or scleral haemorrhage
   - stupor or bizarre behaviour due to ingestion of drugs or poison
   - internal injuries
   - vaginal or anorectal injuries (sexual abuse)
   - burns, scalds

MULTIPLE FRACTURES IN DIFFERENT STAGES OF HEALING ARE A CARDINAL SIGN OF ABUSE

Reporting and documenting abuse

The goal is to initiate an investigation to determine the facts of the situation. Reporting in good faith means that a reasonable suspicion of abuse exists according to your professional judgment, based on the historical findings and physical examination of the patient. A report that does not lead to charges may still have a positive impact on the situation.

Reporting abuse
1. Contact the appropriate humane authority in your jurisdiction and report your concerns.
2. If the animal and/or people involved are at immediate risk, call the police.
3. If there are children involved, report your concerns to Social Services.

Collecting and documenting evidence
1. Work with the investigating agency to develop and document the case.
2. Preserve and document the evidence, e.g.: perform a detailed physical exam, or necropsy
   - record detailed history, including any additional information that may have been told to other staff
   - perform CBC, chemistry panel, U/A, etc.
   - take whole body radiographs to look for fractures in various stages of healing
   - maintain the chain of custody of the evidence. Notify anyone else involved (e.g. laboratory) that this is a forensic investigation.

4. Take lots of good quality photographs and/or video and label appropriately. (Videos are good for musculoskeletal injuries or neurological deficits.)
5. Maintain thorough, legible medical records as legal documents throughout the treatment period.
6. Store all records securely (medical records, lab reports, x-rays, etc). It can take 1-2 years before a case comes to trial.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Go to the CVMA website under Animal Welfare for comprehensive information on responding to animal abuse.

http://canadianveterinarians.net/animal-abuse.aspx

The Link – animal abuse, child abuse and domestic violence

- Recognizing abuse
- Reporting abuse
- Collecting and documenting evidence
- Veterinarians as expert witnesses
- Building a safe and humane community

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See also: www.veterinaryforensics.com

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