

## Quick Facts:

### Why is The Link important for...Veterinary Medicine?



#### **Veterinarians encounter family violence.**

- The veterinary profession's long-established role in public health extends to several forms of family violence prevention.
- In one study of families under investigation for child abuse, co-occurrence of animal abuse ranged from 60% to 88%. These families utilized veterinary services at rates similar to non-abusive households. (Deviney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983).
- One survey of veterinarians estimated that practitioners will see 5.6 cases of animal abuse per 1,000 patients. (Sharpe, 1999)
- In a survey of all North American veterinary schools, 97% of school administrators reported that they believe that practitioners will encounter serious animal abuse during their careers. (Sharpe, 1999).
- The Colorado Veterinary Medical Association reported that 100% of veterinarians believe that non-accidental injury (NAI) occurs in animals, and two-thirds of them had seen cases of NAI in their practices. (American Humane Association, 2003). A similar study in the U.K. reported that 91% of veterinarians acknowledged NAI and 48% had seen or suspected NAI in their practices. (Munro & Thrusfield, 2001)
- A Canadian study reported that 50% of practitioners had seen cases of unintentional maltreatment, and 46% had seen cases of intentional maltreatment, in the past year. (Kovacs, Adams & Carioto, 2004)
- An Australian study reported that in 23% of cases where veterinarians suspected animal abuse, other forms of family violence were either known or suspected. (Gullone & Clarke, 2005).
- The Tufts University College of Veterinary Medicine reported that 78.9% of practitioners had observed at least one case of animal abuse, and 16.4% had observed more than five cases of animal abuse. Over 93% of respondents believed they had an ethical responsibility to report suspected animal abuse, and 44.5% believed this responsibility should be mandated by law. (Donley, Patronek & Luke, 1999)
- According to American Veterinary Medical Association research, females are the primary caregivers in 72.8% of pet-owning households: over 64% of households with children under age 6, and 72% of households with children over age 6, have pets. (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2002). Thus, three of the prime populations for being at risk of family violence – women, children and animals – are the primary clientele for practitioners.

#### **Veterinarians are the best-trained to recognize and respond to improper animal welfare.**

- “Veterinarians are ideally placed as sentinels to identify and deal with animal abuse, and where this is severe or not able to be dealt with effectively, to report it to respective authorities.” --  
*Mark Lawrie, Chief Veterinarian, Royal SPCA of New South Wales, Australia (Lawrie, 2002)*

## **Animal abuse is a public health issue.**

- Child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse and animal cruelty and neglect are widely recognized as public health problems as well as crimes. (Patronek, 2004)
- Incidence of dog bites in homes with physical child abuse have been reported to be 11 times greater than in non-violent households. (Deviney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983)
- **Veterinarians have an obligation to protect not only their patients, but others in the family and the community who may be at risk. Like human health professionals who respond to suspected child abuse and domestic violence, veterinarians have moral and ethical obligations to set high standards for proper care of their patients.**
- C. Everett Koop, M.D. former Surgeon General of the U.S., and George D. Lundberg, M.D., former editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, wrote, “Regarding violence in our society as purely a sociologic matter, or one of law enforcement, has led to unmitigated failure. It is time to test whether violence can be amenable to medical/public health solutions.” (Koop & Lundberg, 1992)

## **There are many good reasons for veterinarians to become involved with The Link.**

### **1. Professional standards encourage Link involvement.**

- The AVMA Principles of Medical Ethics state that “the responsibilities of the veterinary profession extend not only to the patient but also to society. The health of the community as well as the patient deserves the veterinarian’s interest.” (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1999a).

### **2. Participating in Link programs provides opportunities to build bridges to other community groups.**

- Veterinarians and animal welfare organizations may find themselves in adversarial relationships over divisive issues. The Link is one area in which many groups can reach consensus and work together in a multi-disciplinary approach to identify and help resolve cases of family violence.

### **3. Participation in Link programs can elevate the status of the profession.**

- If veterinarians are to be considered on a par with human medical professionals, then veterinarians must accept the same obligations to recognize and report cases of suspected family violence. Veterinary medicine is part of community networks of public health services.

### **4. Pet owners may have strong emotional ties to their animals.**

- Only 2% of pet owners consider their animals as “property.” 51% consider their animals as “companions” and 47% consider them as “members of the family.” (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2002) Because veterinarians see more human clients than animal patients, they may have an impact on their clients’ psychological well-being. (McCulloch, 1976).

## **Comparing Veterinary Reporting Mandates Worldwide**

Veterinary organizations in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand have adopted position statements regarding animal abuse and its links to other forms of family violence. Here are excerpts:

### **United States – American Veterinary Medical Association Position Statement on Animal Abuse and Animal Neglect (1999)**

- “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

through 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.” (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1999b)

#### **Canada – Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (2005)**

- “The CVMA recognizes that veterinarians are in a position to observe occasions of suspected animal abuse and have a moral obligation to report suspected cases. Moral obligation is not a legal obligation. Any legal obligation to report abuse, or provision of immunity from prosecution for veterinarians, is the jurisdiction of the provinces.
- “Society has an obligation to support those veterinarians who report in good faith, using their professional judgment. CVMA encourages veterinary medical associations to lobby their provincial governments to make mandatory the reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians and to provide immunity for good faith professional judgment reports. Other health professionals 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.” (Arkow, 2005)

#### **United Kingdom – Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Professional Code of Conduct (2003)**

- “When a veterinary surgeon is presented with an injured animal whose clinical signs cannot be attributed to the history provided by the client, s/he should include non-accidental injury in their differential diagnosis. If there is suspicion of animal abuse as a result of examining an animal, a veterinary surgeon should consider whether the circumstances are sufficiently serious to justify breaching the usual obligations of client confidentiality.
- “The veterinary surgeon should attempt to discuss his/her concerns with the client. In cases where this would not be appropriate or where the client’s reaction increases rather than allays concerns, the veterinary surgeon should contact relevant authorities.
- “Such action should be taken only when the veterinary surgeon considers on reasonable grounds that either animals show signs of abuse or are at real and immediate risk of abuse. The public interest in protecting an animal overrides the professional obligation to maintain client confidentiality.
- “Given the links between animal and child abuse and domestic violence, a veterinary surgeon reporting suspected animal abuse to the relevant authority should consider whether a child might be at risk. A veterinary surgeon may also consider a child to be at risk in the absence of any animal abuse.
- “Where a veterinary surgeon is concerned about child abuse or domestic violence, he/she should consider reporting the matter to relevant authorities.” (Arkow, 2003)

#### **New Zealand – Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinarians (1998)**

- “A veterinarian who becomes aware of an animal suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress must take action to ensure that the matter is effectively dealt with.

- “If the situation shows no sign of being remedied and the animal is still suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress, the veterinarian must report the case to an inspector under the Animal Welfare Act.” (Veterinary Council of New Zealand, 2004)

## What Can You Do?

- Consider as a differential diagnosis the possibility that an injured or malnourished animal may have been abused or neglected. Be skeptical and do not take the client’s word regarding non-accidental injury (NAI).
- If there are discrepancies among family members’ accounts of an injury, or if a client utilizes several veterinary facilities to evade detection, be suspicious of possible animal abuse. Practitioners have not had much experience in dealing with client histories that are deliberately misleading.
- Be alert to warning signs of NAI: multiple fractures of varying ages; injuries to multiple animals in the home; repetitive histories of accidents; and incidence of family violence.
- Do not be afraid to ask difficult and probing questions. These topics may be uncomfortable, but they are legitimate and important to protect animals.
- Attempt to resolve cases through client education, but where this fails or may exacerbate the risk to the animal and/or others, report the case to the SPCA, humane society, animal control or law enforcement agency, or county child protective services agency. You do not have to prove that neglect or violence occurred to make a report. Client confidentiality may be waived if the health or welfare of the animal or others is jeopardized.
- Take reports of animal cruelty seriously. Animal abuse is a crime and often just the tip of one form of violence occurring in the home. Other animals in the home may be at risk as well.
- Be familiar with anti-cruelty laws in your community and the agencies that enforce them.
- Invite officials from animal protection, child protection, adult protective services, and domestic violence agencies to provide training for your staff on how to recognize and report all forms of family violence.
- Establish lines of communication with these agencies so when your work uncovers family violence you are prepared to make a report or referral as needed.
- Maintain a list of community agencies that provide services and resources for victims of child abuse, animal abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse. Make this list available to staff and clients.
- Offer to serve as an expert court witness in animal cruelty cases.
- Serve on community coalitions against family violence.
- Sponsor a workshop to educate your colleagues about The Link. American Humane has a speakers bureau to provide these presentations.

## Resources for Veterinarians

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