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**FVE REFLECTION PAPER**

**Animal Abuse: what are the roles and responsibilities of the veterinary surgeon?**

**BACKGROUND:**

It may be hard to comprehend why someone would deliberately hurt an animal and then seek veterinary attention. Alternatively, the animal might be brought for veterinary attention by somebody else. However, regardless of the type of practice and even in slaughterhouses, veterinary surgeons may be faced with cases of animal maltreatment and abuse.

It is of key importance that veterinary surgeons (and their teams) are able to recognise abuse and report their concerns accordingly. Unfortunately, currently some vets are poorly trained, or not trained at all, to recognize cases of abuse, and even less to manage them.

**OVERVIEW OF CLASSES of ANIMAL ABUSE:**

As suggested by categorization used for domestic and child abuse, animal abuse can be divided into four categories, which can coexist:

- Neglect
- Physical abuse (non-accidental injury)
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse

**RELEVANT SPECIES**

Companion animals, farm animals, horses and other captive animals such as “exotic species” can be affected by the four types of abuse. According to Arkow and Munro (2008) “It is also necessary to cultivate an awareness of the possibility of animal abuse in animals kept for any purpose”.

**RECOGNISING ANIMAL ABUSE**

Since early intervention may prevent further abuse, it is essential that the possibility of abuse is recognised. The UK Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons (Section 14: Animal Abuse) advises: « 14.13 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 ».

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## **HOW TO APPROACH A CASE OF ANIMAL ABUSE**

The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) and The Links Group have developed guidance documents to support veterinarians in recognising animal abuse and suggesting how to approach a case. This includes appointing a dedicated person within each practice to collate all information and to ensure that discussions take place across the practice team; only then might indicators such as a suspicious history come to light. Veterinarians who become involved in investigating such cases should also always remain aware of their own personal safety.

## **LINK BETWEEN ANIMAL AND HUMAN ABUSE**

There is increasing research and clinical evidence that suggest that there are sometimes inter-relationships, commonly referred as 'links', between the (domestic) abuse of children, adults and animals. A better understanding of these links can help to protect victims, both human and animal, and promote their welfare. If animal abuse is occurring, human abuse may also be present in the same family or community. This is a "one health/one welfare" issue.

Programmes already exist in many countries to raise awareness amongst professionals to the link and some veterinary faculties are already teaching this link in their training.

## **QUESTION OF MORALITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

For veterinary surgeons, rules of confidentiality vary depending on national regulations. Confidentiality protects both the animal's owner and the veterinary surgeon. Veterinarians should not use confidentiality as an excuse to avoid reporting suspicion of animal abuse.

Research in The Netherlands highlighted obstacles for reporting by 'vets' (Enders & Jansen 2009) which need to be addressed as part of any training.

### **To conclude, the FVE Animal welfare group would encourage:**

- Better recognition of animal abuse, based on enhanced knowledge, including development of forensic medicine in this field.
- Faculties of Veterinary Education to include animal abuse modules in their curricula.
- The principle of the UK Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons to be added to the FVE Code of Conduct
- Create easy reporting systems and provide training for Veterinary teams in recognising and reporting animal abuse. Training for official veterinarians how to deal with reports received and confidentiality.
- A joint position paper with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA)
- The cooperation of veterinary surgeons with physicians, health care workers, paediatricians, police officers, social workers, animal welfare officers and lawyers to help ensure prevention, detection, and resolution of cases of animal and human abuse.
- A general discussion about medical secrecy in suspected cases of animal abuse

Note: This paper only covers domestic/kept animals and doesn't cover wildlife crime

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