

Introduction

Veterinarians may encounter situations where they suspect an animal has been abused or neglected. These are challenging situations for veterinarians which lead to concerns for animal health and welfare and may give rise to safety concerns for members of the family.

The purpose of this guideline is to provide information and guidance to veterinarians dealing with suspected or actual animal abuse involving domestic and family violence and to provide information regarding resources available to victims.

Background

[American Humane](#) has highlighted that when “animals in a home are abused or neglected, it is a warning sign that others in the household may not be safe”. Many victim-survivors of domestic and family violence report that a perpetrator had killed their animal or animals and it is common for victim-survivors to delay leaving a perpetrator due to barriers to accessing support (DVNSW).

Abused or neglected animals may be presented by members of the family experiencing violence or indeed by those who are the perpetrators of such violence.

Responsibilities

The Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct ([Code](#)) (cl 1) requires that a veterinarian’s primary concern is for the welfare of animals. Suspected cases of animal abuse and neglect are potential breaches of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* (POCTAA). The Code (cl 12) provides protection for veterinarians who choose to disclose information obtained in the course of their professional practice to relevant authorities in such circumstances.

It is not an individual veterinarian’s responsibility to confirm the animal abuse or neglect or domestic or family violence.

Approach

Veterinarians who suspect animal abuse or neglect should:

1. Consult with senior colleagues
2. Gather information by reviewing the patient and client records to identify any previous veterinary visits that are suspicious
3. Consider seeking consent to hospitalise the animal to provide time to review the case and patient records as well as seek advice from other sources
4. Ensure there is a detailed record of clinical findings, treatment, explanation for the injuries, who was present and suspicions (if any)
5. Record any further actions taken and reporting that occurs.

When discussing suspected animal abuse or neglect with a client it is best to have a veterinary colleague present and to remain calm and objective. Together with education and ongoing management of the patient, this may be an effective method for dealing with any suspicions and meeting responsibilities under the Code.

It may not be appropriate in some circumstances to discuss concerns with the client and instead report your concerns directly to an authorised officer under POCTAA or the police.

The [Veterinary Council of New Zealand](#) has created a useful algorithm for veterinarians who suspect animal abuse or neglect in its publication *Dealing with suspected or actual animal abuse and family violence*, which the Board encourages practitioners to consult if the need arises.

Veterinarians who suspect domestic or family violence

In addition to the approach to suspected animal abuse or neglect outlined above, if it is safe to do so, victims of domestic violence (whether suspected or acknowledged) should be provided with the following information:

1. Call triple zero (000) in an emergency
2. The Department of Community Services [Domestic Violence Line](#) (1800 65 64 63) provides counselling and referrals to women experiencing domestic and family violence
3. [1800 RESPECT](#) (1800 737 732) provides counselling and support for men and women
4. RSPCA [Community Domestic Violence Program](#) provides short-term emergency housing and care for pets

Again, the [Veterinary Council of New Zealand](#) has created a useful algorithm for veterinarians who suspect domestic or family violence in its publication *Dealing with suspected or actual animal abuse and family violence*.

General information

More broadly, veterinary practices may consider the following:

1. Placing information about domestic and family violence in your hospital
2. Developing a policy and protocol for dealing with cases of suspected or actual animal abuse and domestic and family violence including considering whether you can provide emergency boarding for pets
3. Ensure all staff are aware of this issue and your clinic's policy and protocols
4. Ensure all staff protect client contact information to prevent inadvertent release of victim-survivor details to perpetrators
5. Provide training to staff about [how to talk to victims](#) of domestic and family violence

Further Reading

1. Arkow P 2015. Recognizing and responding to cases of suspected animal cruelty, abuse and neglect: what the veterinarian needs to know. *Veterinary Medicine: Research and Reports* no. 6, pp. 349-59.
2. Ascione FR 1998. Battered women's reports of their partners' and their children's cruelty to animal. *Journal of Emotional Abuse* vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 119-33. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Frank_Ascione3/publication/232858858_Battered_Women%27s_Reports_of_Their_Partners%27_and_Their_Children%27s_Cruelty_to_Animals/links/56b0d56308ae9f0ff7b77824.pdf
3. Domestic Violence NSW 2020. Animals and people experiencing domestic and family violence: How their safety and wellbeing are interconnected. Available: <https://www.dvnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Nov-DVNSW-Report-on-Animals-and-People-Experiencing-Domestic-and-Family-Violence.pdf>
4. Lucy's Project – AWARE ARC. Available: <https://lucysproject.com.au/aware-arc/>
5. NSW Government Communities and Justice. I have pets and experiencing domestic violence. Available: <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/domestic-violence/my-situation/i-have-pets>
6. RSPCA NSW Community Domestic Violence Program. Available: <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/what-we-do/working-in-communities/community-domestic-violence-program/#1504656623103-e09e24eb-e577>
7. Tiplady CM, Walsh DB, Phillips CJC 2012. Intimate partner violence and companion animal welfare. *Australian Veterinary Journal* vol. 90, no. 1-2, pp. 48-53.
8. Tong LJ 2014. Fracture characteristics to distinguish between accidental injury and non-accidental injury in dogs. *The Veterinary Journal* vol. 199, no. 3, pp. 392-8.
9. Veterinary Council of New Zealand. Dealing with suspected or actual animal abuse and family violence. Available: https://www.vetcouncil.org.nz/Web/Resources/Guidelines_and_Standards/Web/Publications/Type/Guidelines_and_Standards.aspx?hkey=fd3e1f96-2b66-48e6-b340-3c0d7772d1bf