



Teaching Love  
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**END THE  
CYCLE OF  
VIOLENCE**

## **Animal Cruelty Information for Veterinary Professionals**

### **What is animal cruelty?**

Animal cruelty encompasses a range of behaviors harmful to animals, from neglect to malicious killing. Most cruelty investigated by humane officers is unintentional neglect that can be resolved through education. Intentional cruelty, or abuse, is knowingly depriving an animal of food, water, shelter, socialization, or veterinary care or maliciously torturing, maiming, mutilating, or killing an animal.

### **Why is it a concern?**

Animal cruelty is a concern because of its effect on both animals and humans. While most unintentional cruelty can be resolved through education, some individuals neglect animals because they don't realize they can no longer properly care for them. Intentional cruelty is a particular concern because it is a sign of psychological distress and often indicates that an individual has already experienced abuse or violence or may be predisposed to committing acts of abuse or violence. Intentional cruelty can be an indicator that an individual is developing a pattern of seeking power and control by inflicting suffering on others.

### **Is there any evidence of a connection between animal cruelty and human violence?**

Absolutely. During the last 25 years, many studies in psychology, sociology, and criminology have demonstrated that violent offenders frequently have childhood and adolescent histories of serious and repeated animal cruelty. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has recognized this connection since the 1970s, when bureau analysis of the life histories of imprisoned serial killers suggested that many had killed or tortured animals as children. Other research has shown consistent patterns of animal cruelty among perpetrators of more common forms of violence, including child abuse, spouse abuse, and elder abuse.

### **Is animal cruelty a crime?**

Yes. Animal cruelty is a misdemeanor offense in all fifty states, and at least one form of animal cruelty is considered a felony offense in thirty-one states. Twenty of those states enacted felony animal cruelty laws during the 1990s, and more states are expected to follow this trend. Each state defines for itself what acts are considered animal cruelty and the degree of offense they entail. Penalties range from fines and probation to imprisonment and psychiatric counseling.

### **Would veterinary clients present victims of animal cruelty for care and treatment?**

While it seems hard to believe that a client would present an animal who has been abused, consider the following scenarios:

- A woman who is frequently abused by her spouse brings in the family pet with a broken rib after the abuser kicked the pet to demonstrate his control over the entire family.
- A young male who owns a pit bull often enters his dog in neighborhood "street fights" for weekend amusement. When the dog's bleeding is uncontrollable after a Saturday afternoon skirmish, the owner brings him to your emergency animal clinic.
- Mrs. Smith frequently calls your staff about care for her many small dogs, and occasionally even presents one for treatment. Her "pets" are always suffering from severe skin disease, parasitism, malnutrition, and other management-related diseases. She's evasive when asked.

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### **Have veterinary associations expressed a position on animal cruelty?**

Yes, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) proclaimed its position on cruelty to animals, animal abuse, and animal neglect in 1994. The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may have occasion to observe cases of cruelty to animals, animal abuse, or animal neglect as defined by state law or local ordinances. When these observations occur, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to the appropriate authorities. Such disclosures may be necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people. In addition, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) issued the following position statement in 1999 on the veterinarian's role in preventing animal cruelty. The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) recognizes that veterinarians are in a position to observe occasions of suspected animal abuse. The CVMA believes that in situations that cannot be resolved through education, it is the veterinarian's responsibility to report such observations to the appropriate authorities. Other veterinary organizations, including the American Animal Hospital Association, also denounce animal cruelty and direct veterinarians to take an active role in addressing such acts.

### **What should I do if I suspect an animal has been abused?**

A law enforcement agency is charged with upholding the animal cruelty laws that exist in your state or community. This may be a municipal animal care and control agency, a sheriff's department, or other entity. Before you encounter a case of animal neglect or abuse, it is wise to become familiar with the laws that address animal cruelty and the agency charged with enforcing these laws. When you suspect or have confirmed that an animal has been neglected or abused, file a formal written report with the agency.

### **Am I required to report animal cruelty?**

Although requirements vary from state to state, in several states veterinarians are legally mandated to report incidents of animal cruelty, particularly in cases of organized or staged animal fights (dogfighting or cockfighting). Several other states have instituted or are considering provisions that hold veterinarians harmless from criminal or civil liability for reporting in good faith suspected animal cruelty.

### **Can reports be made anonymously?**

While many jurisdictions will respond to an anonymous complaint, successful prosecution often depends on an identifiable witness who can authenticate evidence.

### **How can cases of animal cruelty be successfully prosecuted?**

Successfully preparing an animal cruelty case for prosecution is similar to preparing any case of criminal violence. Expert testimony addressing the nature and mechanism of the injuries is vital, and in most cases, the veterinarian is the most viable individual for presenting such testimony. However, veterinarians who become involved in prosecution of criminal cases are obligated to avail themselves of knowledge regarding the nature of criminal cases in order to prepare for the important role they will play.

### **Will I be required to testify?**

If a case goes to trial and you have identified yourself as the complainant in either a written or oral report, you may be called to testify and should be prepared to do so. If you were not the complainant but participated in the investigation of an animal cruelty crime, you should be prepared to testify as a factual witness (having examined the animal or the circumstances surrounding the incident) and/or as an expert witness (providing an opinion as to the means and mechanism of the animal's injuries and/or death).

### **Am I required to report suspected abuse of people?**

In a small number of states, veterinarians are specifically included among professionals mandated to report suspected child or elder abuse. However, in more than twenty states, all individuals are required to report suspected child abuse and are granted the same protections as mandated professionals.

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### **What about veterinarian-client confidentiality?**

The confidential relationship that exists between physicians and their patients does not necessarily exist between veterinarians and their clients; in fact, courts in some states have refused to recognize a veterinarian client privilege. However, other states do uphold veterinarian-client confidentiality. These provisions may be found in veterinary practice acts, administrative rules, or in state statutes pertaining to health professions. Veterinarians should become familiar with current laws in their own states and should examine the laws to determine whether a conflict exists between the welfare of a patient and the veterinarian's legal and ethical obligations to the client. In many cases, such discrepancies exist and should be remedied through legislation.

### **What can I do to prevent acts of animal cruelty from occurring in my community and address those that do?**

You can make a difference by forming a community antiviolence coalition with representatives from agencies involved in violence intervention or by working within coalitions that already exist. Interagency coalitions that recognize the connection between animal cruelty and human violence can coordinate antiviolence efforts to better protect the victims of violence, prosecute and punish those who commit violent acts, and prevent future violence through early identification of people with violent tendencies.

### **My client won't leave an abusive situation because of her pets. How can I help?**

Some victims of violence are afraid to leave an abusive situation for fear their abuser will harm their pets. In many communities, veterinary hospitals and animal shelters are creating programs to provide temporary shelter or permanent rehoming services for the animal victims of family violence. These emergency housing programs require careful coordination between the sheltering organizations and human social service organizations in order to fully protect the humans and animals involved. Consider joining or creating such a program.

### **What should I do if I suspect a child has abused an animal?**

Children who harm animals may be reacting to family violence they have witnessed or experienced. Children who are allowed or encouraged to harm animals may be more likely to be violent later in life. Animal cruelty, like other violence, should never be attributed to a stage of development. Research indicates that a child's violence against animals often represents displaced hostility and aggression stemming from neglect or abuse of the child or another family member. If you suspect a child has deliberately harmed an animal, contact your community's law enforcement authorities for animal cruelty crimes, as well as child welfare authorities.

**If you would like more information, please contact Melanie Wagner, M.S. Ed, Director of Humane Education at 310-676-1149 ex. 228 or via email at [HumaneEducation@spcaLA.com](mailto:HumaneEducation@spcaLA.com).**