

# The cruelty connection

The Relationships between Animal Cruelty,  
Child Abuse and Domestic Violence



Including results from the 2012 study  
*Inside the Cruelty Connection: The Role of Animals in  
Decision-Making by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta*

August 2013

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## Introduction

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While there is a growing awareness of the connections between animal abuse and inter-personal (human) violence, much work remains to be done in education and collaboration. This publication, updated from the original 2002 version, will provide some basic information for segments of the population.

This edition incorporates results from the extensive work done by the Alberta SPCA in the past 15 years, including the multi-disciplinary Cruelty/Crime Connection conference held at Edmonton in 2009, and the research study of domestic violence victims in Alberta women's shelters completed in 2012.

Although most of the research data have been collected in recent years, records indicate an intuitive understanding of this topic going back over a century. In 1904 Louise McKinney, the first woman MLA elected in Alberta, urged the formation of humane societies and humane education as a tool for the prevention of violence. Present-day work in this field builds on that legacy.

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## Animal Cruelty: More reasons to take it seriously

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### What is animal cruelty?

The phrase “animal cruelty” encompasses a variety of behaviours harmful to animals, ranging from neglect to malicious torture and killing. Most cases investigated by Alberta SPCA Peace Officers involve neglect – i.e., failure to provide the necessities of life. These can often be resolved through education of the animal owner or caretaker.

Sometimes cruelty to animals is more deliberate. Intentional cruelty can be either wilful or reckless neglect (i.e., the deliberate withholding of food, water, shelter or care) or malicious cruelty (the torture, mutilation, maiming or brutal killing of an animal).

Animal cruelty may be defined differently for various purposes – for example, a legal definition is different from a clinical definition. In general, for an act to be considered as animal cruelty, it must be:

- non-accidental
- socially unacceptable
- enacted on a vertebrate animal
- causing pain, suffering, distress and/or death.

In general, one must consider both the action and the intent. Using these criteria, common activities such as accepted animal husbandry practices, research on animals (provided there are acceptable safeguards) and responsible hunting are not considered to be animal cruelty.

### Is there a link between cruelty to animals and human violence?

Yes. There’s an increasing body of studies and empirical evidence that suggest there are definite links between animal cruelty and human violence. Many studies in Canada and the U.S. have demonstrated this connection. Some of the key findings are:

- Violent offenders frequently have histories of serious and repeated animal cruelty in their childhood and adolescence.
- Cruelty to animals is widely recognized as a warning sign that a child may require help to prevent further violence.
- Childhood cruelty to animals may be an indicator of other forms of abuse in the home.
- Family pets are often targets in domestic violence, and threats of violence toward a pet are often used as a means of control by an abusive family member.
- Many victims of domestic violence remain in an abusive situation out of concern for the safety of their pets or livestock. The next two pages include results from the recent study conducted in Alberta.

### Why is it important to address animal cruelty?

Deliberate cruelty to animals is a form of violence. Besides being harmful to a living creature capable of suffering and feeling pain, intentional animal cruelty can be one of the earliest and most dramatic predictors that an individual is developing a pattern of seeking power and control by inflicting suffering on others. It can also be an indicator of other kinds of violence being perpetrated on family members or others.



## Helping human and animal victims of violence

To address this situation, the Alberta SPCA has led the formation of the Alberta Alliance for the Safety of Animals and People (AASAP). This multi-disciplinary group has formed to examine the obstacles and gaps in service, and to suggest solutions that won't add to the burden of organizations currently helping both human and animal victims of domestic violence. AASAP includes professionals from law enforcement, social services, veterinary services, health, animal welfare, legal education and other communities.

## Animal Abuse in Family Violence

A report released by the Alberta SPCA in November 2012 highlights additional difficulties faced by victims of domestic violence when animals are involved. The report, *Inside the Cruelty Connection: The Role of Animals in Decision-Making by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta*, documents a study conducted throughout the province. The study draws from surveys conducted in five rural and suburban women's shelters, and interviews with former victims of domestic violence.

Some of the key findings are:

- 59% of abused women who had animals delayed leaving out of concern for their animals.
- 36% of abused women with animals reported that their abuser threatened or harmed their animals.
- 85% of threats against animals were carried out.
- 85% of women with both children and animals reported that the children witnessed the threat or harm to the animal.
- In 50% of those cases, it was the child's own pet that was threatened or harmed.

The full report can be accessed at [albertasPCA.org/cruelty](http://albertasPCA.org/cruelty).

The researchers, Dr. Donna Crawford and Dr. Veronika Bohac Clarke, came to the following conclusions as a result of the data collected:

- Decision-making regarding leaving an abusive situation was negatively impacted by the presence of companion animals, and perhaps to an even greater degree, by the ownership of livestock.
- Children are negatively impacted by the same situations as their mothers, and appear to be both long and short term in nature.
- There is a role to be played by SPCAs/humane societies in addressing the findings of the study; and given the interconnected nature of the issues surrounding human and animal abuse, no single agency can possibly do the necessary work on their own.



## Victims tell their stories

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*The study also included interviews of victims to provide a more complete view of the difficulties they encountered. Here are some excerpts from the interviews:*

“I lost my dog; he died the first time I left. He was my lifeline, he was my best friend, and I just lost my courage, I lost my will. To get even with me he took away the one thing he knew gave me strength, my dog.”

“I had called 911 before, but I was too scared to leave, I didn’t know what was going to happen to the dogs... so I just sucked it up and kept going on.”

“When I left... my choices were really limited because of my dog – the need to take care of the dog just made it more complicated. I could have had other ways out and places to go much faster without the dog, but I just couldn’t leave it.”

“The animals were a big part of why I didn’t leave for a shelter, a really big part. I was their caretaker, they depended on me and supported me and I didn’t want to let them down.”

“Transportation in rural areas is a hard one; he sold my vehicle and it’s really hard to ask people to care for three pets. I don’t have cages and they might mess up their car taking them somewhere – and I had no idea where to take them anyway.”

“I went back to get the cats and they’d all been poisoned.”

“He used... my cat to make sure I knew that he was capable of doing what he said he would do. He would take his collar and hang him from his leash from the closet door until his little feet couldn’t touch the ground. And he would say if you touch him, I will kill him.”

“The dog is either still with him or dead. It was devastating to leave (the dog) and I knew what would happen, but it was the only safe way to get out of the house that day. I know he will take it out on him for leaving; the dog will suffer for me and the kids.”

“When I was getting abused, after my beatings... my dog, he’d know and he’d cry too, he’d put his little head on my chest, lick my face. I owe that little dog, because he kept me going. I vowed that I would never abandon him. He’s my little hero... he’s what helps me keep it together. He is just like my child, he is MY dog.”

“If the animals wouldn’t do what he wanted, he beat them. A calf that wouldn’t suck – he beat it to death.”

“I would have been gone long ago if not for the pets.”

### Effects on Children

“I think (the pets) provided emotional stability for the kids, something to hold onto in a sea of uncertainty. When I couldn’t help them anymore, they would go with the dog, and they would tell the dog how it hurt. And to think that you can take that dog away from the child, and they say ‘where is my dog?’ and you say ‘I had to leave him at home with daddy’ – you can’t do that to a kid, you just can’t. You have to make sure you look after that animal, because that’s their lifeline.”



## Animal Protection Laws in Alberta<sup>2</sup>

All domestic animals – pets and livestock – depend on people to meet their basic needs. Animals in distress from lack of these legal requirements cannot ask for help. Our society recognizes that deliberately harming animals or neglecting them is wrong, and has enacted laws to protect animals from abuse and neglect.

Animals are protected under both provincial legislation and the Criminal Code of Canada. Alberta's Animal Protection Act (APA) makes it an offence to cause or allow animals to be in distress due to neglect or abuse. The *Criminal Code* refers to wilful acts of cruelty or neglect, either by the animals' owner or by someone else.

In abusive homes where pets are present, the animals are often victims of abuse along with human victims. In some cases, the animal abuse may be easier to prove or more readily reported by a victim or witness. Knowledge of animal protection laws will be helpful to anyone involved in domestic violence or in helping victims.

### Alberta's Animal Protection Act (APA)

The APA provides mechanisms to help mistreated animals and to hold negligent owners accountable for their actions. Amended and strengthened in 2006, this is the primary piece of legislation used to protect animals in Alberta.

#### Prohibiting Distress

Section 2 of the APA makes it an offence for anyone to cause an animal to be in distress. Furthermore, an animal owner or caretaker must not permit an animal to continue to be in distress. Distress is interpreted in Section 1 (2):

For the purposes of this Act, an animal is in distress if it is

- (a) deprived of adequate shelter, ventilation, space, food, water or veterinary care or reasonable protection from injurious heat or cold,
- (b) injured, sick, in pain or suffering, or
- (c) abused or subjected to undue hardship, privation or neglect.

#### Animal Care Duties

Section 2.1 is similar to the above, stating the duties required of anyone who owns or cares for an animal:

2.1 A person who owns or is in charge of an animal

- (a) must ensure that the animal has adequate food and water,
- (b) must provide the animal with adequate care when the animal is wounded or ill,
- (c) must provide the animal with reasonable protection from injurious heat or cold, and
- (d) must provide the animal with adequate shelter, ventilation and space.

<sup>2</sup>The laws mentioned here are simplified for easy reading. For actual text of laws, refer to the Queen's Printer of Alberta [www.qp.alberta.ca](http://www.qp.alberta.ca)

## Enforcing the Animal Protection Act

In Alberta, Police and Peace Officers receive appointments from the Solicitor General to enforce laws. Peace Officers from the Alberta SPCA enforce the APA in most of the province, wherever local humane societies don't employ peace officers. The Calgary Humane Society and the Edmonton Humane Society enforce the APA within their respective city limits. In some other communities, municipal animal control officers are appointed to enforce the APA.

Municipal Police and RCMP officers enforce all laws, including the APA.

## Criminal Code of Canada

Two parts of the Criminal Code of Canada deal with cruelty to animals.

Sections 444 to 447 of the *Criminal Code* are contained in the part dealing with "Wilful and Forbidden Acts in Respect of Certain Property." Convictions for animal cruelty are often under Section 446:

446 (1) Every one commits an offence who

(a) wilfully causes or, being the owner, wilfully permits to be caused unnecessary pain, suffering or injury to an animal ...

Other subsections refer to wilful neglect, abandonment, poisoning, and other specific offences.

In addition, Section 264.1 makes it an offence to threaten animals.

264.1 (1) Every one commits an offence who, in any manner, knowingly utters, conveys or causes any person to receive a threat...

(c) to kill, poison or injure an animal or bird that is the property of any person.

Cases covered by the *Criminal Code* are usually investigated by municipal police or the RCMP, often in consultation with the appropriate SPCA or Humane Society.

Amendments to the *Criminal Code* proclaimed in 2008 have made these hybrid offences – meaning they can be either a summary conviction or a more serious indictable offence. Consequently, there is a higher burden of proof placed on the investigators of an alleged crime. Initially, each case needs to be treated as though it will have the higher standard (and stiffer penalty) of an indictable offence. Such cases generally require more evidence to be collected before a charge can be laid. Once the Crown (the prosecutor or judge) reviews the evidence presented, he or she decides the mode of prosecution (i.e., summary or indictable offence).

## Penalties

Anyone guilty of an offence under the APA can be ordered by the court to pay a fine of up to \$20,000, and/or be prohibited from custody of animals for any period of time specified by the court.

For most offences under the Criminal Code of Canada, the maximum penalty for an indictable offence is imprisonment for up to five years (two years for uttering threats), while a summary conviction is subject to a fine up to \$10,000 and/or imprisonment up to 18 months.





## Information for the Public

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### Why should I take animal cruelty seriously?

First of all, animals are sentient beings that can suffer and feel pain. People who own or care for animals have a responsibility to ensure their needs are met and minimize any suffering they may experience. Furthermore, cruel treatment of animals is deemed by our society to be unacceptable – that's why we have laws that prohibit animal cruelty.

Another reason to take animal cruelty seriously is the growing body of evidence that links animal cruelty to human violence. Research has shown that violent offenders frequently have childhood and adolescent histories of serious and repeated animal cruelty. Recent studies have also shown that often when animal cruelty occurs, there is also family violence – i.e., child abuse, spousal abuse and elder abuse.

### What can I do about suspected animal abuse?

If you believe there is animal abuse occurring in your community, you should call the appropriate SPCA or humane society for your area. Discuss your concerns and observations – the staff member who takes the calls share your concern and will help to identify the nature of the situation and the appropriate response. Your call will be treated in confidence, though your name and contact information will need to be taken in case further information is needed. On rare occasions (if cases go to court) you may need to provide written or verbal testimony.

Outside of regular office hours, call the Alberta SPCA's toll free number (1-800-455-9003) to get recorded instructions for how to proceed. If an animal is in immediate danger, call your municipal police or RCMP.

### What can I tell my children about animal cruelty?

Tell your children that animal cruelty is never acceptable. Children may go through a phase where they are curious about their effects on animals and may, for example, kill insects. This is a normal phase of discovery but presents an opportunity for adults to teach the value of other animal species.

Unless they have good reason, children should never be allowed to kill or harm animals without some consequences. Without intervention, children who abuse animals may be more likely to become involved in bullying, vandalism and other anti-social behaviours that may escalate to serious violence later in life.

Children who report witnessing violence of any kind should be listened to and have their statements taken seriously. If they report another child who is abusing animals, this should be reported to an animal welfare and/or social service agency.

### What happens when I make a complaint?

Each call may be handled in a variety of ways, depending on the nature and severity of the reported situation. Charges may be laid if warranted, or the situation may be resolved through educational means. Police are sometimes notified, e.g. if there is evidence of possible child abuse.



## Information for Service Providers

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### Why should I be concerned about animal cruelty?

Cruelty to pets within a home is an example of domestic violence, and is often accompanied by other forms of violence and abuse – such as child abuse, spousal abuse and elder abuse.

Sometimes animal protection laws may be more helpful, or easier to prove than laws protecting children. They could be more likely to be reported – e.g., an abused spouse or child may find it easier to disclose animal cruelty than mistreatment of themselves or another family member. The evidence of animal cruelty may be more readily observed and lead to an investigation that uncovers other forms of abuse.

There is a growing awareness that young people who deliberately abuse animals are at risk of developing other violent tendencies. The DSM-IV lists animal cruelty as a symptom indicative of Conduct Disorder. Children who witness animals being abused, threatened or killed in a family violence situation are often traumatized and may display their emotional distress in any number of ways. This is especially true for pets with which they have a strong attachment. Some children may show no outward signs of their emotional turmoil, while others may copy the behaviours they witnessed or act out in other ways.

### How does animal cruelty impact victims of domestic violence?

For many victims of domestic violence, their relationship to their pet is their strongest positive connection with another living being. In abusive relationships, pets are often targeted by the abusive partner and threatened or killed in order to exert power and maintain control over the victim. Furthermore, since emergency shelters are often unable to accommodate pets, many victims delay leaving an abusive situation out of fear for what might happen to their pet. There are indications that animals play a similar role in elder abuse.

### What can I do to help?

If you are counselling someone considering leaving an abusive situation, ask if they own pets or livestock. If so, help them include provisions for the animals in their safety plan. This includes finding someone to care for the animals and making sure vaccinations are up to date. This is particularly important if the animals will be sent to a commercial kennel. Advise them to keep receipts of veterinary visits and food bills as proof of ownership. Add questions about pets and livestock to your intake form, and include animals in Protective Orders. Look into forming links with your local SPCA/humane society to develop protocols for cross-reporting or cross-training. Become more informed – see the bibliography at the end of this document, or contact the Alberta SPCA Education Department to assist with staff training.

## What else is being done?

In many communities, SPCAs and humane societies are working together with emergency shelters to find temporary accommodation for pets. However, much work needs to be done in this area. Recognize that a lack of facilities to house pets can prevent abuse victims from leaving violent situations, and try to find solutions.



## Information for Victims of Domestic Violence

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### **What can I do if my pet is being threatened?**

If a pet is being threatened, you can take some steps to protect it before it is abused. One possibility is to remove it from the home; ask friends or trusted family members if they would be willing to care for your pet temporarily. You can also contact your local SPCA or humane society to see if any foster homes for animals exist in your community. You may need to contact a boarding kennel to make arrangements to have your pet boarded. Threats made against animals can be prosecuted under Section 264.1 of the Criminal Code of Canada. If you receive such threats, keep any evidence you may have (such as emails or voice mail messages) to hand over to police.

### **What can I do if my pet has been abused?**

If a pet has been deliberately hurt, stolen or deprived of care, you can report it either to the police or to the appropriate SPCA or humane society. They will investigate the situation and take appropriate action.

### **Will an abuser only hurt the pet?**

If someone punches, kicks, throws or hurts an animal in any way, that person has demonstrated the capacity for violence. You cannot assume that the violence will stop there. If your partner has harmed or seriously threatened your animal, you and your children may also be in danger.

### **What effect does animal abuse have on my children?**

Some victims of domestic violence have reported that their children have become more aggressive after witnessing animal cruelty in the home. Children sometimes behave more cruelly to animals, and often become more hurtful to others (for example, bullying) or withdrawn and emotional. It's important when talking to a counsellor that you mention any animal abuse that has occurred.

### **How can I keep my pet safe if I leave an abusive situation?**

If you anticipate having your pet housed at a kennel or other facility, keep your veterinarian bills and pet licence receipt handy. Not only will they demonstrate up-to-date vaccinations, but they will also help prove ownership of the pet. If you are applying for an Emergency Protection Order, or Queen's Bench Protection Order, protect your animals by including them in it.



## Information for Teachers

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### Why is it important to address animal cruelty by children?

Children who are deliberately cruel to animals may be abused themselves, and many need intervention to prevent further violence. As a teacher, you may witness various degrees of inappropriate interactions with animals by your students – on the school grounds, on field trips, or with a classroom animal. A student may disclose an act of animal abuse (by self or others in the home) in discussions or writings. Your response can make a huge difference for the student – and the animal(s) involved.

If you notice a student (or group of students) acting cruelly towards an animal, respond appropriately by addressing the act and explaining its consequences on the animal. Treating the opportunity as a “teachable moment” by responding in a calm but firm manner will often afford the best chance of providing information that will cause the students to examine – and hopefully change – their actions.

For acts which are more serious – and/or enacted by older students – you may need to report it to the police, to the Alberta SPCA, and/or Children’s Services. If you want advice on how to respond to a particular situation, you can call the Alberta SPCA Education Department at 780-447-3600 ext. 3739 or email [education@albertaspca.org](mailto:education@albertaspca.org).

### What should I do if a student discloses animal cruelty?

If a student discloses animal cruelty – enacted by the student or another person such as a family member, it is important to respond appropriately according to the seriousness of the incident. Take the student’s comments seriously, but don’t overreact. Try to find out as much as you can, or refer the student to a counsellor. Depending on the nature of the disclosure, you may want to report the incident to the police, the Alberta SPCA or local humane society, or to Children’s Services (especially if the disclosure involves family members). If you want advice on how to respond to a particular situation, you can call the Alberta SPCA Education Department at 780-447-3600 ext. 3739 or email [education@albertaspca.org](mailto:education@albertaspca.org).

Sometimes an educational approach may be appropriate. To learn more about the educational resources available through the Alberta SPCA, visit [everylivingthing.ca](http://everylivingthing.ca).

### How can I encourage students to treat animals humanely?

The principles of Humane Education can be adopted to promote a circle of caring that includes both people and animals. Through its approach and subject content, humane education promotes an understanding of the human responsibility to care for – and about – all living things and the earth we share. You can practice humane education by looking for ways to include examples of kindness in all your subject areas. Most importantly, model kindness and respect to your students through your actions, words, and choice of teaching methods and resources. To learn more about the educational resources available through the Alberta SPCA, visit [everylivingthing.ca](http://everylivingthing.ca).

## Information on our website for teachers:

[everylivingthing.ca](http://everylivingthing.ca)

Every year we have a new poster with a humane quote from a public figure. Check the website to find out how to get a free poster and enter our annual poster response contest.

You can borrow a set of books and accompanying teacher’s guide through our AnimalTales book program, completely free of charge for teachers in Alberta schools (Grades 1 – 6).

Get on our kindness map by enjoying the above activities or holding a service-learning project.

### Other popular items on our website include:

- Kindness Calendar – a listing of worthwhile events;
- Recommended Reading – the best books for students and teachers;
- Animals Across the Curriculum – lesson plans for all grades and subject areas;
- Information for teachers about classroom animals, dissection alternatives, animal-related careers and more;
- Sign up for our e-newsletter, or join our exclusive facebook group for teachers.



## Information for Police and Prosecutors

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### **How can animal protection laws be used to help people?**

Abusers often threaten to harm or kill animals in domestic violence situations as a means of intimidation and control. Knowing this, using animal protection laws such as the Criminal Code of Canada (e.g., Section 264.1 – uttering threats) will help both the animals and their owners.

In addition, children may be more likely to disclose abuse of an animal than abuse of a parent, sibling or themselves. Be attuned to such disclosures and act accordingly.

### **How does animal cruelty fit the profile of violent criminals?**

In the United States, the FBI identifies animal cruelty as one of a cluster of juvenile behaviours associated with increasingly violent behaviour and uses animal cruelty in analyzing the threat potential of suspected and known criminals. The FBI has recognized the connection since the 1970s, when bureau analysis of the life histories of imprisoned serial killers suggested that most had killed or tortured animals before killing people. Other research has shown consistent patterns of more common forms of violence, including child abuse, spousal abuse, and elder abuse.

### **Who can help with animal cruelty cases?**

Alberta SPCA's Animal Protection Services Department works with police and RCMP detachments across the province. If you would like some animal-related assistance, please call 1-800-455-9003. If you want advice on cases involving animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, our Education Department has extensive resources – call 780-447-3600.

### **Is animal cruelty recognized as a sign of mental disorder?**

Yes. In The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), the American Psychiatric Association lists animal cruelty as one of the behaviours signalling conduct disorder. Clinical evidence indicates that animal cruelty is one of the symptoms usually seen at the earliest stages of conduct disorder, often by the age of eight.



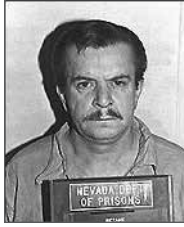
Some infamous serial killers and their animal cruelty histories are:



**Albert DeSalvo**, the “Boston Strangler” who killed 13 women, as a youth had trapped dogs and cats in orange crates and shot arrows through the boxes.



**David Berkowitz**, New York City’s “Son of Sam” gunman who admitted to 13 charges of murder or attempted murder, had previously shot a neighbour’s Labrador retriever claiming that the dog compelled him to kill.



**Carroll Edward Cole**, one of the most prolific killers in modern history, was executed in December of 1985 for 5 of the 35 murders of which he was accused. Cole had said that his first act of violence as a child was to strangle a puppy.



**Jeffrey Dahmer** confessed to killing and dismembering 17 men and boys, several of whom he cannibalized. As a child he had impaled frogs, decapitated dogs, and staked cats to trees in his backyard.



**Ted Bundy** terrorized college campuses in the 1970s after killing 3 women at Florida State University, and is suspected of murdering over 40 women. During his childhood he witnessed his father’s brutality toward animals and he himself tortured animals.



**Eric Smith**, at age 13 bludgeoned 4-year-old Derrick Robie to death. A year before, he strangled his neighbour’s cat with a garden hose. He was told to apologize and do some yard work.



**Keith Jesperson**, the “Happy Face Killer” from BC’s Lower Mainland, claimed a total of 166 victims and had a history of killing dozens of cats and other small animals. In a W5 interview, he coldly stated: “to kill a cat or to kill a person, there’s no difference.”



**Eric Harris**, one of the Columbine High School shooters who killed 12 students and a teacher, had been known to enjoy smashing the heads of mice with a crowbar and setting them on fire.



## Information for Veterinarians

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### Signs of possible physical abuse or non-accidental injury (NAI)

- The history doesn't correspond with the injuries presented.
- The owner shows lack of concern for injuries.
- There is a delay in seeking veterinary treatment.
- There are behavioural signs, e.g. extreme fear in presence of owner, depression, failure to thrive.
- There are clinical signs, e.g. old healed or untreated wounds, multiple fractures in different bones in various stages of healing, bruising\*.

\*Note: due to the animal's hair coat, bruises are usually more easily detected at necropsy.

None of the above signs is diagnostic of NAI, nor does the absence of some signs rule out the possibility of abuse.

– taken from the CVMA:  
*Animal Abuse – What Veterinarians Can Do*

### What is the veterinarian's role in animal abuse cases?

The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) recognizes that veterinarians are in a position to observe occasions of animal abuse and have a moral obligation to report suspected cases. That obligation has increased with the recognized link between abuse in animals and abuse in people. In return, society has an obligation to support those veterinarians who report in good faith, using their professional judgement.

CVMA recognizes that moral obligation is not legal obligation. Any legal obligation to report abuse, or provision of immunity from prosecution for veterinarians, is the jurisdiction of the provinces.

Veterinarians are often the first professionals to see an abused animal. More than the animal may be at risk as studies have documented the connection between abuse of animals and abuse of people, especially vulnerable family members. Veterinarians may be able to play an important role in breaking the cycle of family violence by reporting suspected animal abuse.

### Can – or must – I report animal abuse?

Through provincial animal protection legislation, some provinces (e.g., Ontario, Manitoba and Nova Scotia) have made the reporting of suspected animal abuse mandatory for veterinarians. These provincial acts also provide veterinarians immunity from prosecution when reports to humane authorities are made in good faith. Other provinces, such as Alberta, allow veterinarians to report abuse (i.e. it is not considered a breach of confidentiality).

Some cases of animal abuse, particularly neglect, may be resolved through client education. When education fails, or intentional abuse is suspected, you should notify the appropriate authorities for investigation. It's important to promptly and meticulously document any injuries found, as well as explanations provided by person(s) accompanying the animal. Evidence includes medical records, x-rays, good quality photographs, clinical pathology and necropsy reports, etc.

You may be called upon to give evidence in court if the case goes to prosecution. Veterinarians may also be asked to give testimony as expert witnesses in cases of animal abuse.

## What is the veterinarian's role in Alberta?

Veterinarians' professional obligations to society are highlighted in the Veterinary Oath. In summary, this includes a commitment to:

- use scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society;
- promote animal health and welfare;
- relieve animal suffering;
- protect the health of the public and environment;
- advance comparative medical knowledge.

## What does Alberta law say about veterinarians reporting animal abuse?

Veterinarians in Alberta are regulated provincially by the *Veterinary Profession Act* and *Veterinary Profession General Regulation*. Part 3 of the *Regulation* contains the legislated Code of Ethics for veterinarians. In regards to this discussion, a veterinarian must:

- be dedicated to the benefit of society, the conservation of animal resources and the relief of the suffering of animals
- hold in strict confidence all information acquired in the course of professional relationships with clients, and should not divulge that information unless:
  - › expressly or implicitly authorized by the client or required to do so by law, or
  - › it is information respecting inhumane or negligent treatment of an animal.

The latter exception – which came into force in 2012 – allows a registered veterinarian, technologist, permit holder or student to report the information to a peace officer as defined in the *Animal Protection Act*.

## How does the *Animal Protection Act* protect those reporting animal abuse?

Alberta's *Animal Protection Act* (APA) as revised in 2006 provides protection for individuals who take action in regards to reporting but falls short of mandating reporting:

"14(2) if a person, on reasonable and probable grounds, believes an animal is in distress and reports the distress to a peace officer, no action lies against that person for reporting unless the person reports maliciously or without reasonable or probable grounds for the belief."

Taken together, the APA and the *General Regulation* provide protection to registered veterinarians and their associates who report, in good faith, suspected animal abuse or neglect.

## Reporting Animal Cruelty in Alberta

To report suspected animal abuse or neglect in Alberta, call the appropriate animal welfare agency:

**In Calgary**, call the Calgary Humane Society at 403-205-4455

**In Edmonton**, call the Edmonton Humane Society at 780-491-3517

**In all other areas of Alberta**, call the Alberta SPCA at 1-800-455-9003.

If an animal is in immediate danger outside of regular office hours, call your municipal police or RCMP.



## The cruelty connection

To order copies of this publication, contact the Alberta SPCA Education Department at 780-447-3600 extension 3739.

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