When Animal Abuse Darkens Your Door

AN INTERVIEW WITH MELINDA MERCK, DVM

Dr. Melinda Merck’s name has become internationally associated with veterinary forensics. Most notably, and recently, she played a critical role in the Michael Vick case, performing necropsies on the abused dogs. Her work allowed the prosecution to put together the details of the case, leading to the NFL quarterback’s criminal conviction.

Her passion for veterinary forensic medicine started with a frustration faced by many veterinarians. In 1990, as a recent veterinary graduate from Michigan State University, and new practice owner in Roswell, Georgia, she was disturbed by the number of animal cruelty cases she saw, and sought out education about what she could do to make a difference.

Dr. Merck worked with experts from both human and veterinary forensic medicine as well as humane care enforcement agencies to hone procedures and standards that improved investigation and prosecution of animal cruelty cases. Her extensive work and success in this field has empowered veterinarians to address cases of animal abuse. With this in mind, Today’s Veterinary Practice asked her:

How should the practitioner handle animal abuse cases in practice?

What should be done if an animal presents with potential abuse?

Veterinarians should report abuse as soon as they suspect it, which allows the appropriate authorities to investigate. Document the suspicious signs of abuse and take photos, a very important step! Do not confront the suspected abuser; that is the job of the investigating officer. Often victims of domestic violence bring the animal to the clinic accompanied by the abuser. Confrontation can lead to dangerous situations for the veterinarian, animals, veterinary staff, other victims in the family, and other clients.

What happens when I report abuse?

When a report of suspected abuse is filed, an investigation is launched by the appropriate agency. Veterinarians cannot legally seize an animal, only the investigator may take custody of the animal and have it held at the hospital for treatment and evaluation. In cases where the authorities cannot respond immediately, discuss with them how to protect the animal, which is “evidence,” until the investigator can respond. This may involve offering free overnight observation and hospitalization.

What if the authorities do not act?

Sadly, whether due to lack of agency funding or lack of working relationships, there often is little support regarding enforcement of animal cruelty regulations. If you are dissatisfied with the way a cruelty case was handled, contact the head of the operating agency to work through procedural changes. In addition, you can contact the animal cruelty prosecutors for assistance and work with legislators and the media to craft better animal cruelty regulations or implement better enforcement.

For detailed information on how to recognize, respond, and document suspected abuse, including development of SOPs, read Veterinary Forensics: Animal Cruelty Investigations, 2nd ed (Wiley Publishing).

Reference

How can I prepare for animal cruelty cases?

Creating connections and relationships ahead of time will save you time and energy in understanding the federal, state, and local regulations and procedures for investigating animal abuse cases. Look up state animal cruelty and veterinary reporting laws at animallaw.info. Not only do animal regulations vary state to state, but enforcement also varies. In some areas the local animal control agency investigates cruelty, while in others, such as Miami and Phoenix, entire police units are devoted to this task.

Because each state, county, and city may have a different reporting agency, it is important to identify your local agency ahead of time. Ideally, invite the cruelty investigator and prosecutor to your hospital to discuss appropriate procedures should an animal cruelty case present. They can help you develop a Standard Operating Procedure for handling animal abuse cases.

Veterinarians should realize that the AVMA Ethical Guidelines require veterinarians to report abuse, and that state liability protection laws, including Good Samaritan laws, protect private citizens who report a suspected crime in good faith. Each state has regulations regarding medical records, which often require a subpoena by the investigating agency before release.

Should I report abuse?

In instances of animal abuse, the victim is unable to speak for itself. Most abused animals are young, under 2 years of age. Reporting abuse not only saves the animal from suffering, but most likely saves that animal’s life. More broadly, reporting animal abuse can potentially save human lives as well. The question is: “If not you, then who?”

Animal cruelty is often a “sentinel act,” an act that is associated with domestic violence or child abuse (numerous studies have shown this happens in 70%-90% of cases). In some states, cross-reporting between domestic violence and animal cruelty is required. Therefore, investigating suspected animal abuse may identify human victims, allowing them to receive help.

Ultimately, doing the “right thing” pays it forward by inspiring others to do the same. In practice, your veterinary team will experience higher morale knowing they are working for a just cause. The clients live vicariously through you, telling friends about the veterinarian who helps abused animals. These clients and friends, in turn, help with donations and animal fostering.

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