

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ANIMAL ABUSE DURING COVID-19: THE ROLE OF THE VETERINARIAN

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The video was chilling. A couple and their dog enter a Florida veterinary clinic, and the man holds the dog on the leash while the woman goes into a back bathroom. When she exits, before she returns to her companion's line of vision, she slips a note to the receptionist. She quickly doffs her sunglasses so they can see her bruised eye. The note says: "Call the cops. My boyfriend is threatening me. He has a gun. Please don't let him know."

The staff read the note and exit the area and do everything correctly, calling the police without alerting the man. As the couple and their dog waited in an examination room, time must have almost stood still for the woman, who wouldn't have known exactly what was going on.

The police arrive and take control of the scene. The video inside the exam room clearly shows the man, thumbing his cell phone, when the exam room door opens, and police enter *en masse*. Lifting the man's T-shirt, the police remove his loaded handgun and arrest him. In a later interview, the woman explained her boyfriend had been assaulting her for two days and her dog had what she thought was an injury caused by a bullet grazing its ear.

Not all cases of domestic violence present in such an obvious fashion. There are many other signs, some so subtle that they might go unnoticed. The veterinarian as "the other family doctor" may be the first person to pick up on signs of violence in the home. Veterinarians are trained to treat animal patients. We rely on the guardian for information about the primary concern and history—all the things the animal cannot tell us. We rely on our clinical skills to diagnose and treat the animal. And although animals cannot speak, they may be able to tell us they live in a home where there is domestic violence or animal abuse.

It has been noted by anti-violence workers that the risk of domestic violence drastically increases during a natural disaster, and this has proven to be accurate during the COVID-19 pandemic. A crisis hotline in Vancouver reports that their call volume has increased by 300 per cent during the pandemic. Some of the first countries

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heavily affected by COVID-19, including China, Spain, and the United States, report national or regional increases in domestic violence cases, including child abuse.¹ This is due to more people witnessing abuse in the home and more people with fewer options looking for assistance.² Loss of income and jobs, heightened anxiety and other mental health challenges, families under stress confined in close quarters, and lack of access to professionals such as teachers and doctors who often recognize and report abuse may all contribute to increased incidence of domestic violence.

Due to COVID-19 physical distancing precautions in veterinary facilities, many veterinarians are now not able to speak with animal guardians directly. This can complicate efforts to understand the history and identify risk factors. Survivors of domestic violence may go to great lengths to hide their injuries or deflect any attention brought to the topic. It is important to ask questions in a respectful and tactful manner. Sometimes the answers are in what's not being said. Critical listening is required. Of course, none of us want to believe that injuries in our patients are due to abuse; however, listening to that voice in the back of your head could save an animal's life and potentially even their owner's. Look for unusual or recurrent injuries and stories that don't add up.

In the province of British Columbia, under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, Section 22.1, a registered veterinarian has a duty to report distress. This does not mean that the veterinarian has to provide forensic evidence or irrefutable proof. It means simply that, if a veterinarian on reasonable grounds believes that an animal is being caused distress, they must report it and the case may be investigated by trained investigators. In BC, cruelty cases are investigated by BCSPCA investigators, who have received training on the link between domestic violence and animal abuse and how to cross-report to law enforcement and social services if a victim or family needs help. Veterinarians should familiarize themselves with signs of physical

¹Brittany Hill, Phil Arkow, and Andrew Campbell, "The Hidden Dangers of Lockdown Orders for Domestic Violence Victims and Companion Animals," Animal Legal Defense Fund, April 10, 2020, <https://aldf.org/article/the-hidden-dangers-of-lockdown-orders-for-domestic-violence-victims-and-companion-animals>.

²Rumina Daya and Jon Azpiri, "Calls to Vancouver Domestic Violence Crisis Line Spike 300% amid COVID-19 Pandemic," Global News, April 7, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6789403/domestic-violence-coronavirus>.

³B. J. Barrett, A. Fitzgerald, R. Stevenson, and C. H. Cheung, "Animal Maltreatment as a Risk Marker of More Frequent and Severe Forms of Intimate Partner Violence," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0886260517719542>.

⁴Statistics Canada, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00018-eng.pdf?st=Y9yhapw7>.

abuse and neglect and basic evidence handling and collection techniques required to document cruelty cases. If the veterinarian is concerned for the animal owner's immediate safety, they should contact local police.

Although many women will ask for help, there are still a large portion who won't. This is often for fear of their own life or the life of their pets. In a study conducted by the University of Windsor, it was found that 56 per cent of women delayed leaving because they didn't have anywhere to take their pet—and that 89 per cent of women who were abused reported that their pets were also abused by their partner.³ Abusers may hurt animals in an effort to control or harm women or children in the home. If a veterinarian suspects animal abuse, they may also be suspecting family violence.

Domestic violence in Canada accounts for approximately one-third of police-reported violent crimes, and 6 out of 10 domestic homicides were preceded by a known history of violence.⁴ It is important now, more than ever, to be vigilant and aware. A veterinarian's instincts and experience can identify red flags for violence in the home; reporting these can save both human and animal lives. **WCV**

RESOURCES

THE VETERINARIAN'S ROLE IN HANDLING ANIMAL ABUSE CASES: www.canadianveterinarians.net/policy-advocacy/recognizing-abuse-veterinarians-role

PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS ACT: www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/96372_01

VICTIMLINKBC: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/victimlinkbc

ENDING VIOLENCE ASSOCIATION OF BC: endingviolence.org

BC 211: www.bc211.ca

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