

The cruelty connection

The Relationships between Animal Cruelty,
Child Abuse and Domestic Violence



A Resource Book for Albertans

January 2011



Contents

Introduction	2
Animal Cruelty: More reasons to take it seriously	3
Animal Abuse in Family Violence	4
Animal Protection Laws in Alberta	6
Information for the Public	8
Information for Service Providers	9
Information for Victims of Domestic Violence	10
Information for Teachers	11
Information for Police and Prosecutors	12
Information for Veterinarians	14
Reporting Animal Cruelty in Alberta	15
Bibliography	15

Introduction

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.

Much of the information in this updated version is taken from the Cruelty/Crime Connection conference held at Edmonton in October 2009. The conference proceedings and other information can be found at albertaspca.org/cruelty.

Although most of the research data have been collected recently, 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

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.

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.





Animal Abuse in Family Violence

Numerous studies, including several conducted in Canada, have examined the roles that animals play in family violence. These studies include:

- Ontario SPCA surveys of women in emergency shelters conducted in 1998 and 2000.
- A 2001 collaborative study (the Calgary Humane Society, YWCA Family Violence Prevention Centre, researcher Sue C. McIntosh and supported by RESOLVE Alberta) of 100 women in shelters who owned pets.
- A New Brunswick study completed in 2007 that examined family violence, firearms, and pet abuse within a rural context where firearms are positively valued.

The studies revealed the following information about women in emergency shelters who owned pets:

- Between 25% and 48% delayed leaving an abusive situation out of fear of what would happen to their pet.
- 45% to 61% reported that their abuser either threatened to and/or actually hurt their pet.
- 21% were aware that their abuser had abused animals as a child or adolescent.

Of those women in the Calgary study with both children and pets, who stated their partner had abused their pet:

- 65% reported that their children were aware that their pets were being abused.
- 65% believed that their children were impacted by the abuse of their pets.
- 59% talked with their children about their pets being hurt or threatened, but only 6% discussed it with a counsellor or social service worker.

In 2010, the Alberta SPCA initiated a similar study in rural areas of Alberta. The results are expected to be available by the end of 2011.

Victims tell their stories

While statistics are vital in demonstrating the magnitude of a situation, it is also important to listen to the voices of those affected. Some of those involved in the studies were interviewed and their comments are both revealing and disturbing.

One participant stated that her partner ripped the head off her kitten, which stopped her from doing anything to escape. Another said that once she entered the shelter her cat disappeared, and she subsequently received photographs in which the cat appeared to have been killed. Yet another victim reported that her abusive partner chopped the dog up with an axe and threatened to do the same to her family if she left.

¹ McIntosh, Sue C. (2001) *Research Study: Exploring the Links between Animal Abuse and Family Violence, as reported by Women entering Shelters in Calgary Communities* (used with permission).





One Survivor's Story

These excerpts are taken from a presentation by Glori Phillips at the Alberta SPCA's Cruelty/Crime Connection: Breaking the Chain conference in 2009.

I can remember my brother twisting the cows' tails until they bawled in pain. If the cow wasn't letting down her milk my brother would repeatedly punch her like a punching bag in the belly or kick her in the udder. I can still hear how they would exhale in pain. There were times when my brother would just decide to steer wrestle the cows and he would grab them around their neck and twist their head around. He was never strong enough to actually make them fall, but that never stopped him from trying. On the contrary, it seemed to spur his repeated attempts. All the cows were very scared of him and would scurry past him, as much as Holstein cows can scurry, when he opened the gate for them to go back out to the pasture.

I felt so utterly helpless to protect my animals, and they were all mine. I loved even the funny looking ones. I understood and shared their fears. There was also other violence in my family, and alcoholism, plus a real lack of respect for the individual be they human or animal.

As a young adult I made many poor choices. My first husband was very similar in behaviour toward me as my brother. He was also violent toward our English setter, Brody. Brody would piddle and cower when my husband spoke to him. He would sink to the floor and crawl on his belly towards my husband, begging for kindness. My husband repeatedly shook him when he had an accident while we were house training him. Brody's nose was rubbed in feces if there was a mess. My husband also shook me. Luckily for Brody, my husband made me take him back to the breeder. I was relieved. Now he had a chance at getting a good safe home.

It was impossible for me to defend myself or my animals in my life. The violence perpetrated against me and my animal friends from my brother and my first husband, left me with no idea what a respectful, violence free life could be like.

Now, eight and a half years later, I stand up against any violence or abuse aimed at any person or animal. After countless hours of therapy and medication, along with my kind and patient current husband, I am finally able to recognize the psychological injury that was caused by my brother and others. Research confirms my experiences and gives me hope. I am not the only person who has become mentally injured by watching animal abuse and gone on to allow myself to be abused. Professional people must be alerted to the warning signs that animal abuse is devastating not only for the animal, but also for the people who love and care for the animal.



Victims tell their stories

In terms of effects on children, one participant reported that her partner shot the family dog in plain view of his four-year-old son. Another woman indicated that her children hated their father for hurting the family dog, and felt bad because the dog was trying to protect her.

Other participants noted changes in their children's behaviour after witnessing abuse of their pets by a family member. One noted that her son became more hurtful to others, withdrawn and emotional. Another stated that her young son began to show traits similar to those of her abusive partner, and had a "total disregard for life, even humans." Yet another participant noted that her children "hurt animals when they are angry, because they think this is normal, because they don't realize it can be different."



Animal Protection Laws in Alberta²

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.

Animal Protection is offered under both provincial legislation and the Criminal Code of Canada (the code). 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 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.

²The 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

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 (the code) deal with cruelty to animals.

Sections 444 to 447 of the 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 code are usually investigated by municipal police or the RCMP, often in consultation with the appropriate SPCA or Humane Society.

Amendments to the 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 now 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

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

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 (up to 48% in some studies) 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 Emergency 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.

The Alberta SPCA is currently working with several women's shelters across the province to quantify the impact of animal ownership on victims' decisions to leave abusive situations, and other aspects of family violence dynamics. Watch for the results from the study to be published in late 2011.



Information for Victims of Domestic Violence

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 Protective Order, protect your animals by including them in it.



Information for Teachers

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.

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.

Sometimes an educational approach may be appropriate. To learn more about the educational resources available through the Alberta SPCA, visit 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.

Books about Humane Education and Animal-Assisted Therapy

Loar, Lynn and Libby Colman. *Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy for Children and Families Exposed to Violence*. Latham Foundation, 2004. 230 pp.

Weil, Zoe. *The Power and Promise of Humane Education*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2004. 173 pp.

Weil, Zoe. *Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003. 259 pp.

Raphael, Pamela, Libby Colman and Lynn Loar. *Teaching Compassion: A Guide for Humane Educators, Teachers, and Parents*. Latham Foundation, 1999. 130 pp.

Selby, David. *Earthkind: A Teacher’s Handbook on Humane Education*. Staffordshire, England: Trentham Books, 1995. 412 pp.



Information for Police and Prosecutors

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?

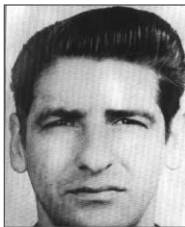
Alberta SPCA's Animal Protection Services Department works with police and RCMP detachments across the province. If you would like some animal-related assistance, please call 1-800-455-9003. If you want advice on cases involving animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, our Education Department has extensive resources – call 780-447-3600 ext. 3739.

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.



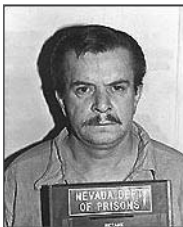
Some infamous serial killers and their animal cruelty histories are:



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

This section is taken from the presentation at the 2009 Cruelty/Crime Connection conference by Dr. Duane Landals DVM, Registrar of the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association. It is used by permission.

The Role of the Veterinarian in Animal Abuse Cases

Suspicion of animal abuse can be a paradoxical situation for a veterinary medical professional. Conflict may arise between professional and legal responsibility. Veterinarians need to balance their responsibilities to the animal, the client and society in general.

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.

Veterinary Profession Act

In addition, Alberta veterinarians are regulated by the Veterinary Profession Act and General Regulations of Alberta. Part 3 of the Alberta General Regulations 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 by law to do so.

It is very clear that a veterinarian has a professional obligation to care for the animal and to relieve its suffering. The conflict arises when they feel it is necessary to report their concerns for the animal to some outside authority. Is this a violation of their legislated responsibility to confidentiality and client/practitioner privilege? There certainly is a challenge in balancing the dedication to society generally and the dedication to the individual client and patient. This conflict is documented in the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) position statement on animal abuse. "The CVMA recognizes that veterinarians are in a position to observe occasions of animal abuse and have a moral obligation to report suspected cases ... In addition society has an obligation to support those veterinarians who report in good faith ... CVMA recognizes that moral obligation is not legal obligation."

Animal Protection Act protection for Veterinarians

The Animal Protection Act (APA) as revised in 2006 provides some 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.”

Subsequently, Council of the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association adopted the following statement for its members in regards to reporting animal abuse. “Members must take appropriate action, which may include reporting to appropriate authorities, in the case of animal welfare infractions and animal abuse. Veterinarians will not be held professionally accountable for breaking client confidentiality when acting on this directive.” While this statement in itself cannot insulate veterinarians from their legal obligations regarding confidentiality, it does assure them that their peers support their actions and they will not be considered guilty of unprofessional conduct if a complaint arises. This is intended to set the standard by which a normal practitioner should act and serves as a basis for professional judgement.



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.

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

Copies are also available for download from albertaspca.org.