

Attitudes, opinions, and experiences of veterinary practitioners regarding animal maltreatment: A survey of southwestern Ontario and the Atlantic provinces



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Summary

- Veterinarians working in private practice are likely to at some point in their career observe cases of intentional and unintentional animal maltreatment.
- A discrepancy exists between the veterinary practitioner's perceived role and responsibility regarding animal maltreatment and the training they have received.

Introduction

In the May 2002 issue of the Canadian Veterinary Journal, an insert from the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association entitled, "Animal Abuse: What Veterinarians Can Do" included the CVMA's position statement on animal abuse:

"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 can not be resolved through education, it is the veterinarian's responsibility to report such observations to the appropriate authorities."

The advocacy of this responsibility suggests a response process is defined and utilized. The objectives of this research were to:

1. Determine how veterinarians define animal maltreatment.
2. Measure the prevalence of maltreated animals seen in the clinic.
3. Determine if veterinarians believe they have a role and responsibility to deal with cases of maltreatment and how they define this role.
4. Determine if veterinarians are adequately trained for this role and responsibility.

Methods

- A practitioner survey was developed based on results of a literature search and in-depth interviews conducted with 10 key informants on the topic of animal maltreatment.
- The survey was sent to a random sample of veterinary practitioners in southwestern Ontario and the Atlantic provinces (N=300).
- The survey was analysed using SPSS (Version 10.0) and descriptive statistics were computed for all responses.

Results

What do veterinarians see?

- **Unintentional animal maltreatment** 50% of respondents saw between 1 and 5 cases in the past year. 16% of respondents saw more than 15 cases in the past year.
- **Intentional animal maltreatment** 46% of respondents saw between 1 and 5 cases in the past year. Only 10% of respondents NEVER saw a case in their entire experience in practice.

What do veterinarians think?

IT'S MY JOB

- 90% of respondents agreed that it was part of the veterinarian's job to respond to animal maltreatment and that learning how to recognize and respond to animal maltreatment should be part of the veterinary curriculum.



NEED TRAINING!

- 57% of respondents felt that their veterinary undergraduate program did not provide them with adequate training in how to recognize animal maltreatment.
- 73% of respondents felt that their veterinary undergraduate program did not provide them with adequate training in how to respond to animal maltreatment.



COMMUNICATION GAP

- Close to 70% of respondents felt competent to report suspicions of animal maltreatment to the proper authorities, yet just over 50% felt competent to discuss these suspicions with their clients.



MAKE IT MANDATORY!

- While over 80% of respondents felt competent to recognize maltreated patients from a medical standpoint, only 37% felt they were competent to respond to such cases from a legal standpoint.
- While less than 17% of respondents thought that the reporting of *unintentional* animal maltreatment should be mandatory, over 80% felt that reporting *intentional* animal maltreatment should be mandated.

What factors influence the veterinarian's suspicions of animal maltreatment?

- Type of injury/illness
- Features of patient history
- Client behaviour
- Patient behaviour
- Communication with client
- Involvement of authorities/agency
- Communication with someone other than client/authorities



What do veterinarians know?

NOT ENOUGH!

- Less than 50% of respondents are familiar with the animal cruelty laws in their province!



What do veterinarians do?

REPORT

- 46% of respondents have reported at least one case of animal maltreatment to the authorities (SPCA, police, etc.).

Discussion

- Gaps exist in both client education and the reporting process.
- This results in maltreated animals "slipping through the cracks".
- A discrepancy exists between the veterinary practitioners perceived responsibilities and their perceived abilities pertaining to these responsibilities.
- This is not surprising considering the lack of education and training about animal maltreatment made available to these practitioners while they attend college.



Recommendations

- **Education** - target the veterinary curriculum to better prepare veterinary students for welfare issues they will face in practice.
- **Promotion** - of positive relationships between veterinarians and their clients and between people and their pets; both resulting in increased animal welfare.
- **Support** - provide veterinarians with legal and professional backing when reporting animal maltreatment in good faith.

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