

## **Animal Abuse and Interpersonal Violence**

**Dr Suzanne Conboy-Hill**

**April 2000**

### **Introduction**

Animal abuse is the deliberate or neglectful harm of an animal and can include beating, starvation, slashing with knives, sodomy, setting on fire, decapitation, skinning alive amongst other actions.

There is increasing evidence that childhood abuse of animals is linked to later interpersonal violence (Felthous and Kellert 1987a; Ascione 1993), sometimes of an extremely serious nature and including mass or serial killings (Lockwood and Hodge 1986). Furthermore, while animal abuse may be a 'rehearsal' for later behaviours, it is not a stage through which the individual passes on the way to these and is likely to continue throughout the person's abusive career. People who have notoriously tortured and killed others frequently have a history of torturing and killing animals in early childhood, often for pleasure. In addition, there are those who, for reasons of mental health problems, poor anger control or intellectual deficit, may also harm or neglect animals. This is rarely for pleasure and may be addressed by managing the underlying cause. Vets are critical to the identification of animal abuse and could provide a link in the chain of evidence needed to identify other possible victims within the perpetrator's range.

### **Identification**

Animal abuse should be viewed in context with the prevailing attitudes of the society in which it occurs (Ascione 1993). It is clear that notions of abuse are linked to the relationship groups of animals have with humans and their capacity to elicit empathy (Felthous and Kellert 1987b) such that insects are viewed as having less 'right' to humane treatment than pet animals whose main function is to provide companionship. Cats appear to be at greatest risk, dogs slightly less so, followed by a range of smaller pet and wild mammals (Felthous and Kellert 1987b). The position of food animals such as cows, chickens and so on is less clear and studies of slaughterhouse workers demonstrate ambivalence of attitude which includes social distancing, demeaning and mechanisation of the killing process in order to avoid emotional conflict. Some workers do show sadistic and violent behaviour which may not be confronted by managers who need to maintain their own social distance from the point of slaughter (Grandin 1988).

Animal abuse may also come about through neglect, impulsive aggression, mental health or personality disorders and is usually associated with pet animals, small wild mammals or those raised for food.

## **Who does this?**

The current position is unclear due to past tendencies to view abusers as a homogenous group. This has confounded both predictive validity and measures of incidence since not all violent offenders will have targeted animals as children because the motivation for adult violence is unrelated to that which now seems to underpin emerging profiles. Two main groups seem to have validity - those who torture and kill for pleasure and those who are impulsively aggressive.

The most researched category identifies people who begin in childhood to torture and kill animals for pleasure and who then seem to develop into abusive and violent adults. Serial killers such as Kemper, Berkovitz, Huberty and De Salvo all had early histories of animal abuse (Lockwood and Hodge 1986) and 25 % of inmates jailed for violence admit to such abuse compared with 5% of prisoners jailed for non-violent acts and 0% of non-offenders (Kellert and Felthous 1985) although these may not represent the same population and there are issues of willingness to report.

Early acts of sadism and torture seem to be indicative of the presence of Anti Social Personality Disorder (ASPD) or psychopathy (Felthous and Kellert 1987b) and may present as part of the triad of symptoms which also includes bed wetting and fire setting (Hellman and Blackman 1966) although this is not clearly established (Heath, Hardesty and Goldfine 1984).

While there is increasing evidence that ASPD has genetic roots, such people have often experienced abuse themselves as children or witnessed it perpetrated against their mother, siblings or family pets. However, those with a rich history of animal abuse are likely to have instigated it themselves (Lockwood and Church 1996). The kinds of behaviours recorded amongst this group, whether parent or proband, include throwing a live cat into an incinerator, throwing animals from high buildings, and exploding a cat in a microwave (Kellert and Felthous 1985). Children witnessing such acts are likely to be doubly jeopardised with regard to later behaviour on the grounds of early experience and genetic predisposition although it is clear that most perpetrators are male.

People with an impulsive aggression profile are likely to target anything or anyone at times of extreme anger and may be remorseful at the consequences of their actions. They are unlikely to abuse animals for pleasure but may threaten or harm them in order to control others such as their partner, children or elderly parents. This group is largely unresearched but is likely to be much larger than that associated with ASPD.

Again unresearched is a group known to clinicians as being at risk of abusing animals through disordered mental state (e.g. Felthous 1984). Psychologists and psychiatrists have described incidences of paranoid attacks on animals thought to be the devil or an alien entity, starvation of pets by people with severe anorexia, or neglect in depression and dementing processes. People with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) are often characterised by superficial and demanding relationships with others, including pets, but also find it hard to take responsibility, frequently blaming others for failures and changing their contacts for professional advice. Such people may neglect animals and seek attention from different vets in order to avoid detection. Attempts have been

made to identify the incidence of animal abuse due to Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP) but this remains unclear due to apparent lack of knowledge among vets asked to respond.

Finally, people with learning disabilities (mental handicap) may find it difficult to understand or prioritise pet care and to organise their efforts towards it so that neglect becomes a major issue. Our service has identified a number of such people who, having had children removed by social services on the grounds of neglect, have subsequently been found to be neglecting pets also. One woman failed to feed her friend's rabbits while she was away because they were 'hers, not mine' and so they died.

### **Implications**

In each of these situations, the fact of animal abuse or neglect is indicative of disordered relationships in which there may be other victims. Ascione (1998) reported on the threatened or actual abuse of family pets by the partners of 71% of his sample of battered women while de Viney, Dickert and Lockwood (1983) detail abuse of pets in 60% of families where child abuse has occurred. Rosen (1995) reviews reports in which animal welfare agencies, called to see a neglected animal, found an emaciated, elderly parent locked in a cupboard or a back room by their adult child. Those who torture, act out violence or neglect animals are likely to do the same to partners, children and elderly parents. For some this is wilful and pleasurable, for the majority it is to do with poor impulse control, mental health issues, ignorance or inadequate coping strategies. Many use the animal as a means of controlling other victims so that threat and harm may be quite widespread within the social range of the perpetrator (e.g. Adams 1994).

### **Action**

In the USA the Humane Society (HSUS) has urged legislation which allows animal and human welfare agencies to consult with each other so that an incidence of animal abuse notified to the HSUS will result in an alert to social services and vice versa. Ascione (1998) describes the plight of abused women refusing to leave a violent partner because he has threatened to kill the family pet. Some prefer to abandon the pet out of town rather than leave it behind and risk harm. Ascione goes on to argue for special provision for the pets of abused women which is immediate and confidential so that the partner cannot gain access it.

First Strike is a US organisation set up to alert agencies to the prevalence and significance of animal abuse and to press for changes in the law and Ascione (1998) has argued that convictions for animal cruelty be viewed as indicators of potential dangerousness. Training of animal welfare staff in issues of child abuse and the mandatory reporting by vets of animal abuse is beginning, again in the USA (Adams 1994). First Strike has set up liaison with the Scottish Society for the Protection of Animals for the same purposes but there is little in England and Wales to alert animal and human welfare agencies to these issues or to facilitate communication.

In conjunction with social workers and the RSPCA, vets are likely to be key players in identifying families at risk but, being relatively independent practitioners, have few

structures available to identify the ‘doctor hopping’ strategies of those seeking treatment for pets without having to reveal a history. They may also not be geared to identifying the ‘cry for help’ issued by an adult or child who brings in one or several injured pets in succession, perhaps hoping that someone will ask the right penetrating question.

### **What is needed**

1. Collaboration between human and animal welfare agencies with statutory communication structures.
2. Cooperation among vets to identify ‘hoppers’.
3. Education of vets to include indicators for human conditions likely to give rise to abuse.
4. Research into the prevalence of the various forms of animal abuse and profiles of abusers.
5. The development of protection strategies to include all vulnerable targets within the range of an identified perpetrator.
6. Formal education and support for those whose abuse is largely neglectful and due to mental health, ignorance or limited coping strategies.

### **Finally**

It is clear from recent history that health care professionals have been capable of using their position to effect crimes against their patients (Beverley Allett - Nurse; Harold Shipman - GP). Workers in slaughterhouses are known to use social distancing in order to cope with their work and maintain ‘objectivity’, some of whom may be abusive and sadistic. Veterinary work offers similar opportunities to its practitioners for the mutilation of animals and so may harbour practitioners who are at best distancing themselves from their actions and at worst using their position to abuse. Single practitioners of all professions are most vulnerable to the development of poor or malicious practice and structures need to be in place to maximise identification and management of those at risk of or actually abusing their patients.

### **References**

- Adams, C. (1994)** Bringing Peace Home: a feminist perspective on the abuse of women, children and pet animals. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 9 63-84.
- Ascione, F., R. (1993)** Children who are Cruel to Animals: a review of research and implications for developmental psychopathology. *Anthrozoos* 6 4 226-247.
- Ascione, F., R. (1998)** Battered Women’s Reports of their Partner’s and their Children’s Cruelty to Animals. *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1 1 119-133.
- De Viney, E., Dickert, J. and Lockwood, R. (1983)** The Care of Pets within Abusing Families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems* 4 321-329.
- Felthous, A. (1984)** Psychotic Perceptions of Pet Animals in Defendants Accused of Violent Crimes. *Behavioural Sciences and the Law* 2 331-339.
- Felthous, A. and Kellert, S. (1987a)** Childhood Cruelty to Animals and Later Aggression Against People: a review. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144 710-717.
- Felthous, A. and Kellert, S. (1987b)** Psychosocial Aspects of Selecting Animal Species for Physical Abuse. *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 32 1713-1723.

**Grandin, T. (1988)** Behaviour of Slaughter Plant and Auction Employees Toward their Animals. Anthrozoos 1 205-213.

**Heath, G., A., Hardesty, V. and Goldfine, P. (1984)** Firesetting, Enuresis and Animal Cruelty. Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy 1 97-100.

**Hellman, D. and Blackman, N. (1966)** Enuresis, Fire Setting and Cruelty to Animals: a triad production of adult crime. American Journal of Psychiatry 122 1431-1435.

**Kellert, S. and Felthous, A. (1985)** Childhood Cruelty Towards Animals among Criminals and Noncriminals. Human Relations 38 1113-1129.

**Lockwood, R. and Church, A. (1996)** Deadly Serious: an FBI commentary on animal cruelty. Humane Society News: Fall 1996 1-4.

**Lockwood, R. and Hodge, G. (1986)** The Tangled Web of Animal Abuse: the links between cruelty to animals and human violence. Humane Society News: Summer 1986 1-6.

**Rosen, B. (1995)** Watch for Pet Abuse - it might save your client's life. Shepherd's ElderCare/Law Newsletter 5 1-9.

First Strike web site **<http://www.hsus.org/current/strike.html>**

HSUS web site **<http://www.hsus.org/>**

**SP Conboy-Hill RGN, BA(Hons),MPhil,MSc,PhD,AFBPS,AdvCertCounsSkills**

**Chartered Clinical and Counselling Psychologist, Affiliate of the Division of Forensic Psychology  
Consultant Psychologist in Learning Disabilities, South Downs Health NHS Trust**