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Speaking notes submitted by Dr. Alice Crook

On behalf of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA)

To the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology

With respect to its hearing on

Bill C-84, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (bestiality and animal fighting)

June 12, 2019

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Madame Chair and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee.

I am a veterinarian and member of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (the CVMA), which represents over 7,400 veterinarians across Canada. I am currently Adjunct Professor and Coordinator of the Sir James Dunn Animal Welfare Centre at the Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island, in Charlottetown and I am past Chair of the CVMA's Animal Welfare Committee. Animal welfare is a top priority for the CVMA. The CVMA provides numerous resources through its website, social media, meetings and conferences aimed at educating its members and the public on the matter of animal abuse, including sexual abuse and animal fighting, extending to recognizing the signs of abuse, and emphasizing the importance of reporting suspected cases of abuse to authorities.

With respect to animal cruelty and neglect, veterinary practitioners are commonly the first professionals to examine a vulnerable and abused animal, including in cases of sexual abuse and animal fighting. We have extensive knowledge and understanding of the care and management of animals, and practical experience in the recognition of the signs of suffering in animals.

The CVMA has actively lobbied for a number of years for amendments to the Criminal Code aimed at strengthening the law with respect to animal cruelty. The CVMA is pleased to support Bill C-84, which proposes an unambiguous definition for bestiality, and a much more comprehensive treatment of animal fighting. I will focus my remarks on the types of injuries and the suffering experienced by animals that are abused through bestiality and animal fighting.

With respect to bestiality, the CVMA believes that Bill C-84 will close a gap that currently exists that effectively legalizes sexual abuse of animals that falls short of penetration. As proposed in C-84, bestiality means any contact for a sexual purpose with an animal. Bestiality (also called animal sexual abuse) can involve a distressingly wide range of animals and result in a wide spectrum of suffering and injury, including death. It may or may not include other physical violence and may or may not result in visible physical injury to the animal. Signs that may be seen in animals that have been sexually assaulted include traumatic injury to the anus, rectum, or vulvar/vaginal area, recurring vaginal or urinary tract infections, foreign objects within the genitourinary tract, and internal injuries.

As a participant in the Canadian Violence-Link Coalition, the CVMA is keenly aware of the well-documented link between abuse of animals and other family violence, including child, spousal, and elder abuse. In CVMA's view, Bill C-84 will help support what is referred to as One Welfare—that is benefitting animals as well as addressing the sexual exploitation of other vulnerable members of society, including children.

With regard to animal fighting, the CVMA recognizes that the current legislation does not include as an offence, maintaining a facility for animals other than cocks, nor does it recognize as an offence the training of animals to fight. The CVMA is pleased that Bill C-84 updates the Criminal Code provisions to include all species of animals, and to add the offences of training animals for fighting and profiting from such activities. I will focus now on the suffering involved in cock and dog fighting, as these are the species most commonly affected in Canada.

In such fights, aggressive animals are pitted against each other, or against bait animals in a confined space. The fight ends when one animal dies or is cowed or is seriously injured. In dogs, the behaviour of the aggressor includes chasing, biting, wrestling, and lunging, until one dog is incapable of continuing, or is withdrawn. Behaviours of the animal victim, such as the losing dog or a bait dog, include distress calls, attempts to retreat or escape, defensive behaviour, appeasement gestures, cowering, or trembling. Typical injuries include multiple bites on the face and legs, bite injuries to the belly and groin of a dog

who is showing submission, “ringing” or degloving injuries on the legs when a dog firmly seizes the lower leg of its opponent who is trying to pull away. Also typical in fighting dogs are multiple injuries in various stages of healing. (These types of injuries are not typical of fighting that may occur between normal dogs. I can provide more information on this subject to the committee, if it so desires.)

Now, I will speak about the emotional experience of the animals involved, both aggressor and victim. They will likely experience anger, fear, panic, helplessness; extreme pain from serious bite and ripping injuries; and lasting pain and discomfort from disabilities such as nerve, muscle, tendon and/or bone damage. You may wonder—what is a “bait dog?” These are smaller dogs that are used in training dogs for fighting; cats and rabbits are also used as bait animals. Clearly such bait animals suffer extreme injury, fear, and panic from which they cannot escape. Survivors may experience anxiety and fear in circumstances similar to those in which the cruel act took place, e.g., the presence of other dogs.

In conclusion, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association is pleased to see notable progress in improving the welfare of animals in Canada in the form of amendments to the Criminal Code through Bill C-84. The CVMA is actively involved in organizations such as the National Farmed Animal Care Council and the National Companion Animal Coalition, as well as with partners such as Humane Canada, allowing us to collaborate with other stakeholders, including industry, to work to ensure that Canada has high standards with respect to the humane treatment of animals. We remain ready to assist the government of Canada in any way to further enhance legislation to protect animals from cruelty and abuse and in this way, help build a more humane and compassionate Canada.