

"But They Said They Were Sorry": Veterinarians' reasons for not reporting animal abuse*

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Introduction:

- Veterinarians have the opportunity to intervene in cases of animal abuse yet many fail to report abuse.

Objectives:

- To explore how veterinarians make decisions regarding animal welfare. The project did not examine abuse specifically however participants expressed concerns regarding their experiences with animal abuse.

Method:

- Open-ended interviews with 41 veterinarians practicing in Western Canada
- Interviews were audio taped, transcribed and analysed with QRS N6

Results:

- 20 participants cited cases of animal abuse but only 2 contacted authorities
- Of the 2 reporting veterinarians, both cited instances where they failed to report abuse (e.g. recurrent multiple fractures to a dog purportedly caused by children)
- Reasons cited for failing to report included
 - Difficulty in recognizing or defining abuse
 - Lack of confidence in responsible authorities
 - Personal concerns - personal safety, litigation or complaints to professional body, unwilling to commit time
- Veterinarians viewed favorably clients exhibiting concern for the animal or remorse for the abuse
- Some veterinarians viewed reporting abuse as punitive to the client rather than a means of protecting the animal

Conclusion:

- Veterinarians are less likely to report instances of animal abuse if their clients express concern or remorse

Implications:

- Veterinarians may lack the necessary skills to assess and evaluate the motivations and abilities of their clients relating to animal care in abuse situations
- Strategies to improve reporting of animal abuse should take into account the perceptions of veterinarians about client remorse



Unreported Abuse/ Neglect Case:
 "this client had a horrible history of neglect and downright abuse of their animals...they brought me this dog that so-called had it's paw stuck underneath the door. It had an open fracture that was about 5-7 days old, a horrible fracture...this may sound silly, but she sounded contrite and sincerely apologetic"

Unreported Abuse Case:
 "the dog came in with busted ribs and the dog is scared shitless of the owner, I am sure he kicked him. So are you going to report him to the SPCA?...the guy trusted [me], he felt guilty so that's why he brought the dog in. Or his wife was concerned because the dog was in pain and the puppy didn't deserve that, or whatever. The point is they brought it in for care, 80% of the people wouldn't even bring him in for care, only the 20% that care bring him in, even though they have inflicted the pain."

Unreported Abuse Case:
 "he woke up and the 7 week old kitten was clawing at him and he picked the kitten up and threw it against the wall and broke its leg...he was under severe stress himself...I ended up having to euthanize the kitten because he had absolutely no money...I didn't feel that reporting him to the SPCA was in anybody's best interest. I almost felt like this guy was suicidal...he brought the kitten to us to try and get it looked after and he was really upset"

Unreported Severe Neglect Case:
 "one lady was extremely eccentric...brought this little guinea pig in and the hind legs were...open stumps with shavings packed in...I tried to explain that the guinea pig needed to be put down. [She said] 'Oh no, I'm just going to take him home'...it's really hard...most of the time the client genuinely cares for the animal, they are just misguided. If you call the authorities on them and have them rip the animal out of their care, then you feel terrible because that person thinks you're the meanest person on earth"

* For the purposes of this research, animal abuse is defined as instances on significant sub-optimal care including non-accidental injury and neglect of severe medical illnesses or injuries.