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Why doctors should care about animal cruelty

BACKGROUND

Animal cruelty is a significant problem for society, and there are good reasons why doctors should be particularly concerned by it. Increasing evidence for links between animal cruelty and child or spousal abuse is an area of growing concern internationally and of real importance to health professionals.

OBJECTIVE

This article aims to raise awareness of the relevance of animal cruelty to medical practice. The links between animal cruelty and human health are discussed broadly and some wider ethical issues raised.

DISCUSSION

Animal cruelty impacts on human health in disparate ways: intentional and unintentional acts of cruelty may reflect underlying mental health problems that need to be addressed. Cruelty within the family setting is an important sentinel for domestic violence and should prompt an assessment for possible child abuse. Furthermore, animal cruelty raises important questions about the nature of empathy, and the type of society that we wish to live in.

Australia has recently experienced a highly publicised spate of violent attacks against animals. On the surface animal cruelty might not seem like a medical issue, but there are good reasons why medical practitioners should be concerned by it:

- unintentional acts of cruelty may occur when mental illness is poorly managed
- intentional acts of cruelty may indicate major underlying psychological problems
- the abuse of animals, both by adults and children, is an important indicator of child or spousal abuse within the same family¹, and
- cruelty is inherently wrong and modern society does not, and should not, condone the victimisation of those who are vulnerable.

Defining the problem

What constitutes cruelty? Legally there is often little agreement, even between legislatures within the same country. In general, the law recognises both direct cruelty, such as assault, and cruelty resulting from negligence, such as failure to provide adequate veterinary treatment. Most scientific studies of animal cruelty use a definition that deals only with direct, intentional, acts. For example, 'socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death

of an animal'.¹ Because a conservative definition of cruelty is used, most studies will necessarily under report the true extent of cruelty to animals. As there is no mandatory obligation to report suspected cases of animal cruelty, there are few data from which to accurately gauge the size of the problem or trends over time.

Why cruelty occurs

In some cases, acts of cruelty toward companion animals may reflect previously undiagnosed or poorly managed mental illness. For many sufferers of mental illness pets play an important supportive role. Unfortunately, during exacerbations of illness it sometimes becomes difficult or impossible to meet the pet's needs. In depressive illnesses where there is a lack of motivation, water and food deprivation or a failure to provide veterinary treatment may result (in an agricultural setting entire herds or flocks can be affected). In cases of psychotic illness, attacks may be directed against pets as a result of delusional beliefs. The hoarding of large numbers of animals, and subsequent poor standard of care, may also be a sentinel for mental health problems or dementia.² Animal welfare agencies, social welfare workers, and health care providers need to be sensitive to these problems.

In contrast, some cases of animal cruelty reflect fundamental personality flaws such as a lack of empathy

or a delight in cruelty. Recent Australian research has found that cruelty to animals is associated with personality traits of low empathy and callous disregard in children of both sexes and may be an early manifestation of conduct problems associated with these traits.³ Animal cruelty is used as a criterion for the diagnosis of conduct disorder (DSM IV, 1994), and is associated with antisocial as well as other personality disorders, antisocial personality traits and polysubstance abuse.⁴ Studies of serial killers (sexual homicide perpetrators), adult male sex offenders and juvenile sex offenders have all found substantially higher levels of animal cruelty in these criminals than has been reported for nonviolent criminals; 46%, 48% and 30% respectively.¹ A retrospective analysis of high

school shootings in America found a similar prevalence of alleged prior history of animal cruelty (45%) in the children who committed these crimes.⁵ Childhood abuse of animals is associated with a broad range of violent crimes at a later age and there are also significant associations with property offences, drug offences, public disorder offences and a range of antisocial problems.^{6,7} It has been argued that the observed associations with impulsive acts may reflect a general lack of forethought and self control.

Animal cruelty and interpersonal violence

In addition to the behaviours discussed above, there is mounting evidence of links between animal cruelty and domestic violence. A recent

Australian study found that when compared with women who had no history of family violence: 46% of abused women reported threats of abuse against their pets (vs. 6% in the normal population), 53% reported actual physical harm to their pets (vs. 0% in the normal population), and 17.3% reported that their pets were killed (vs. 0% in the normal population).⁸ Given that this study only included deliberate physical abuse of pets; excluding reports such as suspicious accidents, refusal of veterinary care, refusal to allow the feeding of pets, deliberate failure to provide adequate shelter for pets, and having pets euthanased against a partner's wishes; the true rate of animal abuse within the domestic violence setting may be higher. Similar studies from the United States

Table 1. Assessing childhood cruelty to animals¹³

Screening checklist for parents

Question	Response				
My child is rough with animals	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
My child causes harm to animals	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
The last time my child harmed an animal was	Never	>1 year	Last week	Yesterday	Today
My child has harmed small insects	No	Yes			
My child has harmed other nondomestic animals	No	Yes			
My child has harmed other people's pets	No	Yes			
My child has harmed his/her own pets	No	Yes			
My child has harmed animals alone	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
My child has harmed animals with others	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
My child has harmed animals	Never	Accidentally	In curiosity	Maybe intentionally	Definitely intentionally
I believe my child has secretly harmed animals	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
My child has shown pleasure when harming animals	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Score	0	1	2	3	4

Cut off values for referral for further assessment

Age	Child's gender	
	Female	Male
5	2.5	7.4
6	10.6	8.0
7	5.9	7.0
8	6.7	6.9
9	8.7	6.5
10	4.0	4.2
11	4.0	7.9
12	4.1	7.5

Responses are scored as indicated in the table. Total scores more than cutoff values warrant referral for further assessment (there is a 15% chance of a false positive and a 0% chance of a false negative result)

and Canada found that 26–57% of women staying in domestic violence shelters report that their partner has harmed or killed their pets, while 39–42% report threats of harm to their pets.^{9–11} Studies have shown that fear for the safety of their pets leads 18–43% of women to delay leaving abusive relationships.^{9–11} These concerns may be exacerbated where children are involved, because women do not want to further traumatise their children by separating them from animals that they care for, and that provide them with important emotional support.

Although many children from abusive households bond strongly with animals, when children are exposed to violence within the home they sometimes begin to abuse animals themselves. This can stem from a range of reasons including, but not limited to, killing an animal to protect it from ongoing abuse, imitation, identification with the abuser, and post-traumatic play.¹ There is some evidence that the younger children are when exposed to animal cruelty the more likely they are to become cruel to animals themselves, and the younger the age at which they are likely to begin.¹² Because of this link with abuse, some legislatures now require psychiatric assessment of all children accused of animal cruelty in order to determine the cause of their behaviour.

One means of assessing animal cruelty in children (as a part of a psychological assessment) is to ask parents to answer questions about their child's behaviour. The obvious problem with this approach is that children can be secretive and parents may be unaware of any acts of cruelty that their child has committed. Research from the USA using parental reporting found that approximately 5% of normal children will have committed acts of animal cruelty in the past 2 months, in contrast with 20–35% of boys and 5–17% of girls referred for assessment by mental health clinics. Importantly, a Canadian study found that where approximately 2% of parents reported that their children committed acts of cruelty toward animals, 10% of the children themselves reported that they had been cruel to animals.¹ It could be argued that children and adults may define cruelty differently, and that differences in reporting between parents and children may partly reflect this. However, studies of vandalism and arson have found the same

type of discrepancies, suggesting that parents really are unaware of the acts of cruelty that their children have committed. It is likely therefore that the real incidence of cruelty in the USA study is substantially higher than reported figures.

Normal children also commit acts of cruelty to animals while they are growing up, as part of experimentation; finding out how the world around them works and determining boundaries between right and wrong. Checklists such as the one developed by Guymer et al¹³ can be useful in determining if a child's behaviour toward animals is normal or not (*Table 1*).

Impact on society

Although the bulk of scientific literature investigating animal cruelty is relatively recent, recognition of the relationship between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence is not new and has been debated by philosophers from St Thomas Aquinas to Kant. The basis of many philosophical arguments is that empathy for living things is a fundamental aspect of good character and that those who lack empathy toward animals will also be found wanting in their empathy toward others. However, it should not just be a desire to minimise aggression toward ourselves that motivates us to oppose animal cruelty. Acts of cruelty are inherently wrong; they lessen us as a society. Animals, children, the aged, the ill, the disabled, and the marginalised are all subject to victimisation, and are deserving of society's protection. We may never achieve an ideal society, but we are nothing if we do not protect those who are unable to protect themselves.

Summary of important points

- There are good reasons why medical practitioners should be particularly concerned by animal cruelty.
- Both intentional and unintentional acts of cruelty may reflect underlying mental health problems that need to be addressed.
- Cruelty within the family setting is an important sentinel for domestic violence and should prompt an assessment for possible child abuse.
- Animal cruelty raises important questions about the nature of empathy, and the type of society that we wish to live in.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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