

The link between violence to animals and people in Australia

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Abstract

Australia was relatively slow to focus on the link between violence to Animals and People in comparison to the United States, United Kingdom and even New Zealand. The issue of mandatory reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians gained momentum following the introduction of a form of mandatory reporting in NZ in 1999 and this stimulated attention on the broader issue. Criminal profiling in NSW that indicated links between animal abuse and other crimes as well as work with domestic violence by psychologists in Victoria also raised awareness of this issue.

The presentation will look at other key factors that have moved focus on this issue forward in Australia. Strategies will be examined in dealing with the problem. The Animal Management Officer may well be the first person to observe evidence of this problem. This serious social problem requires a multidisciplinary approach, and the key role of the AMO is emphasised.

Introduction

Over the last 35 years there has been enormous change in society attitudes to the way that animals are cared for. This is true for both commercially farmed animals and species regarded as family pets.

There has also been enormous change in society's awareness and attitudes to how violence and human abuse, particularly child abuse, has been dealt with. Kempe et al (1962) published a groundbreaking paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, "The battered-child syndrome". Lynch (1985) says that this paper was instrumental in gaining the medical profession's acknowledgment that abuse of children was a diagnostic possibility, despite the fact that physical abuse of children had been documented for centuries. There has subsequently been extensive research with textbooks categorising child abuse and guidelines developed to help health professionals differentiate accidental and deliberate injuries. (Blumenthal, 1994, Meadow, 1997, Hobbs et al, 1999)

There has been increasing awareness of animal abuse by veterinarians and the public at large. There are clear links between abuse that is perpetrated on animals to that perpetrated on humans. Proactivity by society and particular stakeholders, such as animal management officers, animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and police, in respect to animal abuse has the potential to save human life and suffering as well as animal life and suffering.

Background

Man has interacted with animals from time immemorial. This has become more intense with the domestication of species for farming and companion pet purposes. Although at times seen as exploitative, this should be considered as a role of responsibility or stewardship. There are clear educational benefits that man can gain from his association, management and care of animals. One of these benefits is the development of skills that are subsequently utilised in human-to-human interactions. In recent years there has been a focus on the human-animal bond. (Garner and Pukay, 2001) This has been promoted as a concept to raise the quality of care provided for both animal and owner and to raise the reward of job satisfaction by veterinarians, veterinary nurses and others involved in animal care and management.

The link between violence to animals and people - Non-Australian research

Munro (1996) has pointed out the similarity between physical abuse of children and companion animals and called for the establishment of diagnostic criteria to separate accidental from deliberate injury to animals.

There have been outlines of the clinical and pathological features of physical abuse of animals that emphasise the similarity to the diagnostic pointers that have been developed for child abuse cases. (Munro, 1998 and 1999)

The positive side of man's relationship with animals has been epitomised in the human-animal bond but the negative side can be seen in the "Link between violence to people and animals".

There has been clear evidence to show the strength of this sad link:

- Cruelty to animals in childhood was admitted to by:
 - 25% incarcerated aggressive men (Kellert & Feithous, 1985)
 - 36% of assaultive women offenders (Felthous & Yudowitz, 1977)
 - 36% men incarcerated for serial sexual homicide (Ressler et al, 1988)
 - <5% non-violent, non-incarcerated adults and children despite a lack of systematically collected data on incidence and prevalence of animal cruelty.
- 53 families with pets who met state criteria for child abuse neglect were surveyed (Deviney, Dicker & Lockwood, 1983)
 - 60% of these families' pets also abused or neglected
 - 88% when child physical abuse was present
- 34.8% of sexually abused boys and 27.5% of sexually abused girls were reported for being cruel to animals (Frederich, 1992) 4.9% and 3.3% respectively in the normal population (non-abused)
- Ascione (1998) surveyed women seeking safety at a shelter for battered women. 74% currently owned, or owned a pet within last 12 months, 71% of these reported instances where partners had either threatened or actually hurt or killed their pets

Thirty-one states have adopted felony-level animal anti-cruelty laws (this is equivalent to an indictable offence in Australia), and several other states have passed laws mandating that individuals convicted of animal cruelty receive psychological evaluation and counselling. (Ponder and Lockwood, 2001)

There has been significant focus over time to establish that there is a link between violence to animals and people but little work has been done to establish that kindness to animals can result in less violence to animals and people and thus a less violent society. Some studies have shown that children in whom empathy to animals was encouraged showed a concomitant rise in empathy to human beings. (Ascione, 1992, Ascione et al, 2000 and Ascione, 2005)

There have been some novel preventative programs for troubled youth using interaction with animals and animal training as rehabilitative programs for violent youth. The YAPP program in Toronto is an example of this. (Mathews, 2002)

Another aspect of prevention that has been improving in recent years is the formation of alliances between animal and child welfare organizations. These programs, labelled "First Strike" have been established in the US by the Humane Society which has both animal and child-welfare roles.

In the UK the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and Scottish SPCA and NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) collaborate to the extent that if one organisation is called in they will look for evidence of the other kind of abuse and notify the other organisation as appropriate. (Graham, 2005)

The link between violence to animals and people - Australian research and commentary

The issue of the link between violence to animals and people gained momentum in the veterinary community in 2000. In July of this year a debate was held by the Animal Welfare Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientist. There was focus on the issue of mandatory reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians following the introduction of a form of mandatory reporting in NZ in 1999 and this stimulated attention on the broader issue of "the link".

Profiling of criminals in New South Wales (NSW) was performed by police clinical psychologist, Dr John Clarke. He examined records of cruelty convictions by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) NSW to examine the issue of cross reporting. Cross reporting is the reporting of convictions of violent acts on animals by animal welfare agencies prosecuting such offences to police intelligence and the sharing of police intelligence of cruelty to animals with agencies that investigate and prosecute it.

John Clarke's work showed that this has the potential to aid in the identification of certain perpetrators of violent crime against humans. He also showed that there was little cross reporting occurring at the time and this was likely to lead to delays in the apprehension of suspects, putting the community at risk and leading to homicides that might otherwise be preventable. (Clarke, 2005)

Professor Elenore Gullone and collaborators from Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, researched the links between animal abuse and domestic (or family) violence. They found that in women seeking refuge from abuse, 56% stated that their partner had abused or killed one or more of their pets. Children were also found to have witnessed threats and abuse and the children themselves subsequently engaged in abusive behaviours, confirming disturbing trends seen elsewhere. Women delayed the seeking of refuge in 35% of cases for fear of their companion animals being harmed in their absence. (Fawcett et al, 2002)

Awareness of this aspect of the link and its confirmation in the Australian situation has led to the development of service agreements between the RSPCA and agencies that deal with domestic violence in NSW, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

In February 2004 there was a cruelty incident in Townsville where 3 army officers tortured a cat to death, dragging it behind a vehicle. There was public outrage and the army personnel were subsequently discharged. Questions were raised at the appropriateness of the penalties that were given. There has been a long campaign by RSPCA and other animal welfare groups to seek stronger penalties for animal cruelty.

At the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) National conference in May 2004 a full day was dedicated by the Special Interest Group-Australian Veterinarians for Animal Welfare and Ethics (AVAWA) to the issue of the link. Papers were delivered by a number of authors who had pioneered examination of the issue in Australia.

A discussion paper was delivered by the leader of the Australian Democrats, Senator Andrew Bartlett. (Bartlett, 2004) Previously, the link had been the subject of an address in the NSW Legislative Assembly (Corbett, 2000). These events help to highlight the rising political importance in Australia of the link. Particular focus has been made about serial killers and the link.

**52nd Parliament – Animal Abuse and Sociopathy
Link 11/10/2000 Hon AG Corbett:**

"In the 1970s research into prisoner profiles found a strong link between serial killers and a history of cruelty to animals.

More recent studies into current and past cases have confirmed the link. Retrospective studies of the life of convicted sadistic murderers and serial murderers showed a startling proportion of those murderers had a history of animal abuse, often starting in childhood.

The roll call of internationally infamous killers includes Jeffrey Dahmer, Milwaukee's cannibal killer of 16 young men; Albert deSalvo, the Boston Strangler, who murdered 13 women; David Berkowitz, the son of Sam; David Harker, Britain's cannibal killer, and even the two 10-year-olds, Robert Thompson and John Venables, who killed toddler Jamie Bulger. They all had a history of animal torture or violence in their youth.

Australia has not escaped the profile: Paul Denyer, the Frankston serial killer of three women in 1993, and John Travis, one of the Cobby killers, both have a history of animal abuse, starting in childhood."

Other papers dealing with the link were presented at the 2004 AVA conference. A paper was presented detailing a study that looked at the diagnosis of animal abuse by veterinarians and the attitudes of veterinarians to the co-morbidity of animal and human abuse in Australia. (Green and Gullone, 2004). Mandatory reporting by veterinarians of violence to animals was considered, as was the role of educating the public and clients about animal welfare and minimising violence to animals. The behavioural manifestations of animal abuse and cruelty were also examined (Seksal, 2004).

A paper was given to focus on the role that the AVA and veterinarians should and do have in dealing with this important societal issue. (Bain, 2004) The AVA subsequently adopted the following policy. "The AVA recommends that veterinarians report suspected animal abuse to relevant authorities."

RSPCA Australia national policies states:-

- H1.5 Domestic violence and cruelty to animals
 - 1.5.1 RSPCA Australia recognises the link between domestic violence and cruelty to animals, and that cruelty to animals may be a precursor to other forms of violence.
 - 1.5.2 The RSPCA, where resources allow, aims to protect the welfare of animals at risk through domestic violence by providing appropriate emergency care and support.
 - 1.5.3 The RSPCA also recognises that by providing care and support for animals at risk, it is also providing support for human victims

In February 2005 RSPCA Australia dedicated its Annual Scientific Seminar to the topic of the link under the title of "Cruelty to animals a human problem."

In January 2005 three Sydney teenagers were caught on closed circuit television (CTV) cameras at a railway station violently attacking a small kitten. In addition a further case where another kitten was doused with petrol and set alight occurred only days after the initial incident. There was enormous media coverage and public outrage. The NSW Minister of Police set up a task force to investigate the issue of the link.

The Task Force was comprised of representatives from the Attorney General's Department, NSW Police, Justice, Health, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Primary Industries, the Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (RSPCA), the Department of Community Services and the Australian Veterinary Association.

It was chaired by the Director General of the Ministry for Police, Mr Les Tree. The recommendations of the Task Force are still confidential and will be reported soon, but some issues that were considered were the mandatory reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians, the mandated requirement for psychiatric or psychological assessment of offenders, cross reporting, education programs in schools and rehabilitation programs for offenders.

There have been calls in Australia for more research to whether cruelty to animals can be used as a specific predictor of concurrent future violence. (Fawcett et al, 2002 and Lymbery, 2005) Some prominent work has been done in Australia in this direction (Dadds et al, 2002 and 2004). Luk et al (1999) found that children described as cruel to animals by their parents were more likely to experience severe conduct problems.

Research (Fawcett et al, 2002) has shown that offenders are often, but not always, juveniles. In most cases where juveniles are involved the offences are one-off and do not result in any systematic abuse of animals. This is not always the case. The risk of escalation of this behaviour may be assessed by reference to certain criteria. If a child is assessed as being at risk, and has not yet reached puberty, it is possible to take steps to prevent the offending behaviour from escalating. After puberty, this is difficult, if not impossible. Even when behaviour escalates to assaults on a person, assaults on animals often continues.

Nevertheless, the call for more research to examine the link should not hamper research, and even roll out of educative and preventative programs. In Australia there are a number of examples of educative programs which promote care and kindness to animals. AVA PetPEP is operative in most states. RSPCA Victoria has made a significant investment in education through an interactive facility for school children. Many of these exist and their promotion should be encouraged and research done to assess their effectiveness.

Rehabilitation programs using animals in dealing with conduct disordered and violent children have been run in Australia. One such program is run at Sage's Cottage and Children's Farm in Victoria. This was based on a US program "Forget-Me-Not Farm" established by the Sonoma County Humane Society. There are obvious and clear risks in having programs to rehabilitate offenders of animal violence or cruelty and wisdom would dictate that this may be a strategy to be considered some time into the future. It is hoped that research will clarify the causes of the dysfunction that occurs and help to investigate appropriate strategies. The focus should always be on the preventative measures that education programs provide.

A significant role could be played in dealing with violence in indigenous communities. Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC) is an umbrella group that seeks to coordinate the improvement of animal welfare and management. It has recently looked at the link between violence between animals and people in indigenous communities and delivered a presentation on this topic at the AVA National conference in May 2005. It is a sensitive area. Nevertheless, it is clear that although statistics available are imperfect, they are sufficient to demonstrate the occurrence of violence in indigenous communities and among indigenous people 'is disproportionately high in comparison to the rates of the same types of violence in the Australian population as a whole' (Memmott et al, 2001). All sub-groups of society experience levels of violence and indigenous communities are not alone in experiencing higher levels than average. There are also concerns about housing commission areas.

There has been recognition by indigenous leaders about the need to reduce levels of violence in indigenous communities. O'Donoghue (2001) illustrates the extent of the problem of family violence, noting that many Indigenous children are growing up in communities where violence has become 'a normal and ordinary part of life'.

Professor Mick Dodson (2003) has noted that he feels 'unable to give comfort to the view that a non-Indigenous person should leave public statements on these questions to Indigenous people alone.... The tragic circumstances I refer to are not alone the business of those who suffer them.'

It is important that trial projects are established in indigenous communities to assess the social impacts of improved animal care and particularly the caring required for this by community members, especially children. A key role can be played by the infrastructure of environmental health officers (EHOs) and environmental health workers (EHWs) that has been established in some parts of Australia. Better management of dogs is a likely way to empower struggling communities by providing employment and education and training opportunities. If empathy to animals can be generated by the children to whom it is targeted there may be long term benefit in the reduction of violence on indigenous communities.

Similar projects could be considered in housing commission areas in Australia's cities. There is more opportunity for delivery on indigenous communities with the resource of AMRRIC to act in a national coordinating role. A number of AMOs deal directly with many difficult problems of animal management on indigenous communities. Short term strategies have invariably lead to short term solutions that relapse into mismanagement. Visionary and sustainable strategies must be found. Universally, educational delivery (as difficult as this may be) can provide more long term gain. There is a unique opportunity with the rising cross-cultural acceptance of the need for mutual obligation in service provision and funding that may see the initiatives discussed move forward.

The role of Veterinarians and AMOs in dealing with animal abuse

It has been said that veterinarians are well positioned to monitor occurrence of abuse and neglect of animals and indeed to be proactively involved in dealing with it (Lawrie, 2002). The same can be said for AMOs and their understanding of the issues related to violence to animals will be another critical piece in the management of this societal problem.

In a survey conducted of small animal practitioners in the UK 48.3% had either seen or suspected non-accidental injury (NAI). (Munro and Thrusfield, 2001 a) It would be interesting to do a similar survey of AMOs. In the former study four hundred and forty-eight cases were documented predominantly in dogs and cats. The factors that either raised suspicion or facilitated recognition of NAI included the following:

- implication of a particular person
- features of the history
- referral agency involvement
- behaviour of the owner and/or the animal
- nature of the injuries
- socio-economic class of owners

These criteria apply to identification of the problem by AMOs in the field. Terminology is critical. Munro and Thrusfield (2001b) say that most people are familiar with the term "child abuse" though perhaps unfamiliar with all the types that can occur. They cite Meadow's (1997) classification of abuse of children encompassing:

- physical abuse (synonyms: non-accidental injury (NAI), 'battered-child syndrome')
- sexual abuse
- emotional abuse
- neglect (deprivation of the basic necessities of life: food, warmth, shelter, affection)

Munro and Thrusfield (2001b) go on to point out how the terminology is universally accepted and used and that the phrase 'cruelty to children' is rarely being heard nowadays. They discuss the fact that societies maintain separate animal groups used for different purposes with treatment considered acceptable in one group of animals being judged as abusive or cruel in another. They promote the adoption of child abuse terminology in the case of companion animals (though it may be applied to appropriate cases in any other type of animal) to promote a common language and to help mutual understanding when working with medical health professionals.

A variety of circumstances may be associated with animal cruelty. Research suggests that animal cruelty offenders may be persons who feel powerless to deal with the violence occurring in other areas of their lives. For example, children who are living in a domestic violence situation, or suffering abuse. (Ascione, 2005)

Others may be persons who wish to show power as an implied threat, for example men in domestic violence situations or career criminals. Criminals might ill-treat a dog kept to protect property where drugs or guns are located. This ill treatment, which may include failure to provide adequate food and shelter, can make the animal unpredictable and dangerous. This is particularly relevant for animals kept for the purpose of taking part in illegal dog-fighting. (Fawcett et al, 2002) Sadly these are situations that many AMOs are familiar with and have to deal with. A better understanding of the link will help in the comprehension of some of these difficult situations.

Barriers to reporting animal abuse

There are barriers to the reporting of animal abuse by veterinarians. (Ascione and Barnard, 1998). Some of these are:

- fear that reporting will compromise safety of victim;
- lack of training in recognition of abuse/neglect;
- perceptions that no action will be taken as a result of reporting;
- lack of knowledge of available resources of families
- client confidentiality - ethical / legal
- endanger safety of self, family, staff, etc.

These barriers are appropriate to the barriers that AMOs also face, though one could replace client confidentiality with privacy issues. Due consideration of these barriers must be given for the safety of AMOs in their workplace. Unfortunately, there may not be opportunity to deliberately avoid contact with such problems as they may confront AMOs in their normal duties. A greater understanding of issue will assist in being able to deal with this important societal issue and reduce risk to the officer.

Conclusion

Many aspects of the link between violence to animals and people have been discussed. AMOs are key stakeholders in dealing with animals and communities. They are the eyes and ears of our communities in monitoring a number of issues that affect animals and people. They are strategically placed to play a role in dealing with the link and in fact may well be frequently confronted with manifestations of it. Along with animal welfare organisations and veterinarians and human health agencies, AMOs need to be aware of developments in this important issue. Particular points that should be considered are:-

- recognise signs of human cruelty
- develop better cruelty definitions and clear reporting responsibility
- advocate for stricter anti-cruelty legislation
- if children talk about their animals, listen
- promote educational programs for children that promote kindness to animals

- assess such programs through research where possible
- especially consider such strategies in communities identified as struggling to deal with family violence eg indigenous communities and housing commission areas
- mandate cross-reporting
- promote rehabilitation programs for troubled youth using animals but closely monitor and assess such programs
- create awareness that when abuse is part of family dysfunction there may be both human and animal victims

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