



TRENDS IN VETERINARY NURSING

# Animal Cruelty Detection and Response

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**O**ver the last 50 years, research has shown that even though veterinarians know it is important to respond to cases of suspected animal cruelty, they often find it difficult to detect and/or respond to such cases. Veterinary nurses, who often spend more time with patients and speak directly with clients in the clinic setting, may be the first to identify signs of suspected animal cruelty and should be equipped to handle these situations when they arise.

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In parallel professions, nurses have played and continue to play a crucial role in both responding to cruelty and promoting welfare. In human health care, nurses are advocates for their patients and play an important role when it comes to responding to suspected abuse or neglect of children, elders, and/or dependent adults. In the field of laboratory animal medicine, laboratory animal veterinary nurses have been the driving force behind improvements in animal welfare and husbandry for animals used in laboratory settings.<sup>1</sup>

Animal welfare advocates include veterinary nurses in calls for veterinary professionals to take the lead in preventing and responding to animal cruelty in the community,<sup>2</sup> yet very little is known about their current needs and experiences in these instances. One British study found that registered veterinary nurses were more likely to detect suspected animal fighting than veterinarians.<sup>3</sup> In these cases, veterinary nurses faced the same obstacles to suspected cruelty response as veterinarians, including doubt about the case, fear of losing the client, and breaching client confidentiality.<sup>3</sup> A survey from the United States also identified that veterinary professionals faced similar obstacles when faced with other categories of suspected cruelty.<sup>4</sup> In general, dealing with suspected animal cruelty can be a cause of stress and anxiety for people entering and currently in the profession.<sup>5</sup>

Arming veterinary professionals with training and workplace protocols to support them in identifying and responding to suspected animal cruelty is one way to help the professionals, their patients, and their community. Veterinary medicine is provided by a team of professionals and limiting studies to veterinarians can provide an incomplete picture.<sup>6</sup> It is important for all veterinary professionals to provide leadership to their communities as they work to prevent and respond to animal cruelty.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) carried out a nationwide survey that included veterinarians, veterinary nurses/technicians, and support staff to understand how often employees are seeing cases of suspected animal cruelty, what types they are seeing, and what determines whether they respond with education and/or with reports to law enforcement. A total of 1027 respondents from 56 U.S. states and territories completed the survey.<sup>7</sup>

Credentialed and noncredentialed veterinary nurses/technicians were surveyed; for this article, the statistics focus on credentialed veterinary nurses/technicians.



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## CRUELTY CASES SEEN

The ASPCA survey results showed that veterinary nurses/technicians were more likely than veterinarians to disclose seeing suspected cruelty in their career (83% versus 75%) and over the last 12 months (36% versus 27%).<sup>7</sup> Veterinary nurses/technicians saw an average of 3.9 suspected cases of cruelty in the previous year compared to 1.4 suspected cases for veterinarians.<sup>7</sup>

Across all of the respondents, the main predictors of seeing more cases of suspected animal cruelty were being a veterinary nurse/technician or veterinary assistant; having training related to animal cruelty; and being in workplaces where more at-risk animals would be seen, such as animal shelters, practices with emergency intake, and workplaces designated to receive cases from law enforcement.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons for veterinary nurses/technicians seeing more suspected cases are not clear but may be because, in many modern practices, they spend more time with clients overall and therefore have more opportunities to detect cases where there is a reasonable suspicion of animal cruelty. Veterinary nurses/technicians may assist multiple veterinarians with appointments throughout the day, as well as see veterinary nurse/technician appointments, which could lead to having contact with more patients per day than some veterinarians.

## Veterinary Nurse/Technician Needs

Both veterinary nurses/technicians and veterinarians identified training as the area that would be most likely to increase their ability to detect and respond to suspected cruelty cases.<sup>7</sup> Other factors included support from others at the practice, access to forensic veterinarians and other specialists, and level of certainty about outcomes. Lack of access to training in animal cruelty, including veterinary forensics and law, was an



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obstacle experienced by both veterinary nurses/technicians (70%) and veterinarians (65%).<sup>7</sup> This may be even more significant for veterinary nurses/technicians, as they are less likely to have already received some kind of formal training relating to animal cruelty. While 28% of veterinarians had received some structured training relating to animal cruelty, only 14% of veterinary nurses/technicians had.<sup>7</sup> Given that veterinary nurses/technicians mention being motivated to train in this area, the obstacles to training are likely related to availability and accessibility.

#### Additional Resources

- ASPCApro Veterinary Resources for Recognizing and Reporting Animal Cruelty and Neglect [aspcapro.org/resource/veterinary-resources-recognizing-and-reporting-animal-cruelty-and-neglect](https://aspcapro.org/resource/veterinary-resources-recognizing-and-reporting-animal-cruelty-and-neglect)
- ASPCApro webinars [bit.ly/3zzx9K5](https://bit.ly/3zzx9K5)
- Florida International University courses in veterinary forensics [gfjc.fiu.edu/research/veterinary-forensics](https://gfjc.fiu.edu/research/veterinary-forensics)
- National Link Coalition [nationallinkcoalition.org](https://nationallinkcoalition.org)
- University of Florida Veterinary Forensic Sciences Online Graduate Programs [vetforensics.med.ufl.edu](https://vetforensics.med.ufl.edu)
- VetFolio Veterinary Forensic Science & Medicine CE course, part 1 [vetfolio.com/courses/veterinary-forensic-science-medicine-1](https://vetfolio.com/courses/veterinary-forensic-science-medicine-1)

Veterinary nurses/technicians typically have lower incomes<sup>8</sup> and fewer benefits than veterinarians.<sup>9</sup> As such, training that does exist is often more difficult to access due to the associated costs of registration, travel, and/or time away from their homes and places of employment. To support the continuing education of veterinary nurses/technicians in this area, practice owners and managers can support their staff by providing paid time to complete the training and/or cover the registration fees and related travel expenses.

The factors that influenced whether reporting of suspected acts of animal cruelty occurred were substantially the same for veterinarians and veterinary nurses/technicians.<sup>7</sup> Reports were more likely to occur if the veterinary workplace had a policy relating to how suspected cases of animal cruelty should be handled and the individual self-identified as a mandated reporter. However, 69% of veterinary nurses/technicians indicated that their workplace did not have a policy for managing suspected cases of animal cruelty.<sup>7</sup> Reporting status was shown to be an important educational need, with many respondents unsure of their reporting status (29%) or seeming to understand it incorrectly based on the current laws in their state (18%).<sup>7</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Overall, this recent survey showed that veterinary professionals are highly motivated to respond to the suspected cases of animal cruelty they see in practice.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, lack of training, lack of access to training, and the absence of workplace policies may prevent them from following through on responding to suspected cruelty.

In many practices, veterinary nurses have extensive contact with clients and patients, including taking histories and providing follow-up instructions and care. This often places the veterinary nurse as the first person on the team to develop a reasonable suspicion that some form of cruelty may be occurring. To add to the stress of facing suspected animal cruelty, veterinary nurses often develop long-term positive relationships with patients and clients, which may cause hesitancy when considering making a report of suspected cruelty. This burden may be alleviated when they have received anticruelty training, when they have protection under the law when reporting in good faith, and/or when they have the support of their employer via a related policy.



How can veterinary nurses be better supported in working to prevent, identify, and respond to suspected animal cruelty? Educational institutions can start by incorporating anticruelty training into their curriculums. Veterinary practices can provide access to continuing education by covering costs related to registering for and participating in training. It may be useful to have veterinary team members in different roles attend the same training and then work together to develop policies and procedures in a coordinated manner.

Veterinary practices may consider appointing a staff member, such as a senior veterinary nurse, to be the lead on management of cases of suspected cruelty. This person should be given time, resources, and authority not only for regular training but also for developing and maintaining the anticruelty workplace policy and forming working relationships with key law enforcement personnel and others (such as consulting forensic veterinarians), as needed.

## SUMMARY

Research has shown that compared to other veterinary professionals, veterinary nurses have the highest exposure to cases of suspected animal cruelty, and they are strongly motivated to participate in training to improve their anticruelty competencies.<sup>7</sup> Veterinary medicine is typically provided in a team setting, and it is important for the practice to support their team members when reports are made. When practices support their staff and actively work to prevent animal cruelty, they are also working to reduce the stress on their team, build their reputation, and support the people and pets in their community. **TVN**

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Alison is a forensic veterinary technician with the ASPCA veterinary forensic science teams. She holds a veterinary technician AS degree from Penn Foster College, a BS degree in biological sciences from Florida State University, and a MS degree in anthrozoology from Canisius College. In her current role, she supports forensic veterinarians with national large-scale animal cruelty case response, research, and teaching. She is Human-Animal Bond Certified, Fear Free Elite Certified, and Low Stress Handling Silver Certified. Alison has presented at the Prairie States Animal Welfare Conference, FIU Animal Cruelty Investigations Workshop, and at multiple veterinary nurse/technician and assistant programs in Florida.



### Emily Patterson-Kane

Emily trained as an animal psychologist (PhD) at University of Waikato and Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. She conducted extensive research into the welfare of animals, including studying the environmental preferences of rats and the emotional expressions of pigs. She particularly enjoys working with veterinary professionals to advance animal welfare, which was a focus of her previous role as an animal welfare scientist at the AVMA as well as in her current role as a director of research at the ASPCA. Emily is a coauthor of *The Sciences of Animal Welfare* (2008) and *Rethinking the Animal Rights Movement* (2022) and is currently working on an introductory undergraduate textbook on the subject of animal welfare science.