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# An Ethicist's Commentary on Whether Veterinarians Should Report Cruelty

Bernard Rollin, PhD

Concern about cruelty to animals is as old as recorded human thought. It can be found in the Old Testament, in classical philosophy, and in various strains of Eastern thought. Beginning in Britain in the early nineteenth century, concerns about cruelty to animals were codified in anticruelty laws, and one can find virtually no civilized society that does not include such legislation in its legal system.

Sources of social and philosophical concern about cruelty to animals have been twofold: First, there is a direct concern for the suffering of animals as conscious beings. This is specifically expressed in the ancient rabbinic tradition of Judaism, as the concept of "Tsaar Baalai Chayim" literally, the "suffering of living things." Second, and of great historical importance, there is the notion that those who are cruel to animals are likely to "graduate" to people, and thus such behavior must be disallowed. This was the position of Saint Thomas Aquinas and is, in fact, official Roman Catholic theological doctrine (Aquinas believed that animals, lacking immortal souls, were in and of themselves not of moral concern, but that cruel behavior tended to spread). One can also find elements of this argument, historically, in judicial decisions interpreting the anticruelty laws in the United States.

Contemporary social ethics seem to embody both of these traditional concerns. First, as I have indicated in earlier columns and in other writings, society is in the process of developing an expanded ethic for the treatment of animals, which even addresses animal suffering that is not the result of cruelty, such as that arising out of research, testing, and industrialized agriculture. In such a milieu, there is, *a fortiori*, greater concern with the sort of wanton actions addressed by the cruelty laws. Second, contemporary research has confirmed the intuition connecting animal abuse with human abuse<sup>1</sup>. It is now known that most of our recent, prominent serial killers had histories of cruelty to animals. Of particular interest is the close connection that has been established between the abuse of animals and the abuse of children.

Interestingly enough, for much of our history—indeed, well into the nineteenth century and, in some ways, even today—children enjoyed a moral status somewhat similar to animals; both were, in essence, property. It is ironic that, in the United States, laws against cruelty to animals were promulgated prior to laws forbidding cruelty to children; indeed, the first case of child abuse was prosecuted using the animal cruelty laws! The fact that, to this day, the American Humane Association has both an animal protection division and a child protection division bespeaks this close historical connection.

Conceptually, it is not hard to speculate about the connection between child abuse and animal abuse. Both children and animals are totally dependent, totally vulnerable, totally helpless, and totally innocent. The sort of coward, bully, or psychopath drawn to gratuitously hurting one would surely be equally drawn to harming the other, since the ease of victimization is manifested in both groups. Indeed, a recent article in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* has explicitly spelled out the connection between the two forms of abuse, with special reference to the responsibility of veterinarians<sup>2</sup>.

In the face of our discussion, the conclusion is evident: Yes, veterinarians should be obliged to report suspected animal abuse, for two excellent reasons. First, veterinarians need to be at the forefront of response to the new social concern about animals. I have argued for fifteen years that veterinarians are the rational, natural advocates for animals in society and, furthermore, that society expects them to fill this role. If they do not act against cruelty to animals, when even the traditional social ethic for animals condemned cruelty and codified that condemnation in law, how can they possibly be credible in responding to new and growing social ethical concerns about other areas of animal use not motivated by cruelty, from agriculture to zoos? Second, as health care professionals with an obligation to public health and welfare, they must act to ferret out those individuals likely to move from animal abuse to human abuse, particularly child abuse. Finally, they owe it to themselves to do it. Veterinarians see a great deal of animal abuse, much of it not the result of cruelty but rather a product of ignorance, greed, stupidity, etc. Often they have little power to prevent the problems that demoralize their professional life; for example, the constant requests for euthanizing healthy animals. This is a very stressful situation, which can erode job satisfaction and lead to physical and mental health problems. In cases of overt cruelty, at least, they can be empowered to address the situation. Exercise of such empowerment must surely be an effective tool against the ravages of what, elsewhere, I have called "moral stress"-the discord between one's primary reason for entering veterinary medicine, that is, concern for animal well-being, and one's inability to stop many of the practices that go counter to animal well-being.

At the Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, there has long been a policy requiring that every clinician who suspects cruelty must report the case to the director of the hospital, who then takes responsibility for reporting the case to the authorities.

Finally, such reporting should be legally mandated, so that there is no dilemma for the veterinarian-he or she should be obliged to report, by the ethic of social consensus, and thus is not betraying any confidence.

I thank Dr. Tim Blackwell for discussion and valuable suggestions.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Kellert S, Felthous A. Childhood cruelty toward animals among criminals and non-criminals. *Hum Relations* 1985; 38: 1113-1129.

<sup>2</sup> Arkow P. Child abuse, animal abuse, and the veterinarian. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1994; 204: 1004-1006.