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# Hurting Pets to Get Attention and Drugs: A Growing Problem

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# Hurting Pets to Get Attention and Drugs: A Growing Problem

"Munchausen by proxy" and opioid addiction can cause intentional animal abuse.

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More people intentionally hurt their [pets](#) than you probably think. For example, the 404 veterinarians who participated in [a survey](#) conducted by researchers at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) said they had treated “non-accidental physical injuries” in 225 dogs and 168 cats. The forms of abuse were horrifying, as were the injuries – broken bones, ruptured organs, damaged brains, blindness, and on and on. But two little-known causes of intentional human-inflicted injuries on pets are both particularly interesting and alarming. The first is fascinating but very rare. The second, unfortunately, is becoming more common.

## Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy in Pets

[Munchausen by proxy](#) (also called “fictitious disorder by proxy”) is among the strangest of [psychiatric](#) disorders. In these cases, a [caretaker](#) induces an illness or injury in another individual because they crave sympathy and [attention](#). Most often the perpetrator is a mother who harms her own child. For example, in order to get attention, a [Florida woman](#) made her child Jennifer sick by contaminating the child’s blood, tampering with her feeding tube, and giving Jennifer unprescribed medications. By the time Jennifer was eight, she had spent 640 days in hospitals. Fortunately, the disorder is rare with fewer than 1,000 cases each year in the United States.

But, as described by researchers James Oxley and Marc Feldman in [an article](#) in the journal *Companion Animal*, sometimes the victim is a pet. Take a case published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* by Dr. Feldman, a psychiatrist at the University of Alabama. A 45-year-old childless woman referred to “Ms. M” obtained a Doberman pinscher. She soon began repeatedly taking her new pet to the veterinarian. She claimed the dog was suffering from a severe stomach disorder. When lab tests came back negative, the veterinarian recommended a series of changes in the animal’s [diet](#) and feeding schedule. But over the next couple of months, the dog’s health did not improve. Indeed, it had lost nearly 50% of its body weight, and Ms. M was calling the veterinarian nearly every day.

The real source of the animal’s problem, however, came to light when Ms. M went on vacation and boarded her pet with a dog breeder. In its new digs, the dog immediately began to eat ravenously. It quickly regained lost weight and showed no signs of any stomach disorders. The breeder realized something was amok. She refused to return the dog to Ms. M when she got back from her vacation, and she informed Ms. M’s veterinarian what had happened. When the veterinarian confronted Ms. M, she immediately broke into tears and begged [forgiveness](#). Then she admitted she had purposely starved the dog and had made up symptoms in order to solicit the attention and concern of others, including the veterinarian. Further, it turned out that Ms. M had two other dogs who had died under suspicious circumstances. Fortunately, things turned out well for the Doberman. It remained with the breeder and, as Dr. Feldman reported, “thrived under the breeders care.”

Nine of the 393 incidents of intentional injury of cats and dogs described by veterinarians who participated in the University of Edinburgh survey were cases of [Munchausen](#) by proxy in animals. Six of the cases

involved dogs, two involved cats, and one involved “8 to 12 pets.” In two cases, the animals survived, in three cases, they died, and in two cases the animals had to be euthanized because of the severity of their injuries. In addition to making his dog sick, one of the owners was convicted for poisoning his own child.

### **Using Pets to Gain Access to Addictive Drugs**

While cases of Munchausen by proxy in animals are apparently very rare, according to [news reports](#), using pets to score [drugs](#) is on the upswing. In 2017, 72,000 Americans died from drug overdoses, a death toll greater than that caused by automobile crashes (40,000 deaths) and guns (15,500 deaths) combined. Nearly 50,000 of these deaths were the result of opioid overdoses. With increased opioid abuse, addicts are turning to unusual sources for illegal prescription drugs. This includes their veterinarians. For example, in 2014, [a woman in Elizabethtown](#), Kentucky was charged with three counts of animal torture and obtaining a controlled substance by fraud. She had inflicted multiple cuts on her golden retriever on three different occasions in order to take her dog’s Tramadol, an opioid commonly used in veterinary medicine.

The abuse of veterinary drugs by pet owners is a not a new phenomenon. One of my friends, a former veterinarian, told me that back when he was practicing, he would occasionally have clients who abused their dog’s veterinary [Fentanyl](#) patches. In response to a 2002 survey conducted by Tulane University researchers, 35 veterinarians reported that one or more of their clients had falsely presented symptoms in their dogs or cats in order to get prescription drugs. These included [benzodiazepines](#), anabolic steroids, [antidepressants](#), and opiates. The Tulane researchers referred to this practice as “[malingering](#) by animal proxy.” And a new study by researchers at the University of Colorado indicates this is a growing problem.

Because of incidents of misuse of veterinary medications, the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention recently conducted an on-line survey of 189 veterinarians. The results of the survey were reported in an article titled “[Prescription Opioid Epidemic: Do Veterinarians Have a Dog in the Fight](#)” published in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The investigators found that 13% of the veterinarians surveyed were aware of one or more of their clients who had intentionally injured or made an animal sick in order to obtain drugs. Importantly, 63% of the veterinarians rated their veterinary medical school training in opioid abuse as either fair, poor, or absent.

The Colorado study is the first attempt to systematically investigate the magnitude of this problem. At this point, there is little information on how common it is for opioid addicts to use their pets to acquire prescription drugs. Indeed, my cat Tilly’s veterinarian tells me he rarely prescribes opioids and that he has never had a client who he suspected had intentionally harmed their pet either to get attention or obtain drugs.

However, the Food and Drug Administration is sufficiently concerned about the situation that Scott Gottlieb, the agency’s director has issued a directive on “responsible opioid prescribing for pain [management](#) in animals.” You can read it [here](#).

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