

The Connection between Cruelty and Human Violence: “Interlocking Oppressions” or “The Link”

During your practice, you almost certainly will see a connection between violence against companion animals and violence against humans. This broad phenomenon, which can also extend to other kinds of nonhuman animals, is sometimes called “interlocking oppressions” because, sadly, violence begets more violence—and since one kind of violence affects other kinds of violence, different forms are said to be “interlocked” with one another.

A simple way to explain the problem to others is this—allowing one form of violence to go unchecked means that other forms of violence may also be committed because those who use violence to dominate others are often indiscriminate when it comes to choosing additional targets.

The connection between one kind of violence and another is also referred to as “The Link”—the connection is so common that the presence of certain kinds of violence can be used to assess the likelihood of other kinds of violence. Here are some figures that confirm how interlocked one form of violence is with other forms.

Some basic facts about this problem:

- a 1997 national study of women's shelters found that 85% of women in the shelter disclosed that there had also been pet abuse in the home. 63% of children in these shelters talked about animal abuse at home.
- a 1983 study showed that abused animals were found in 88% of homes of families where child abuse occurred.

Cruelty begets not only more cruelty within the home, but also cruelty that eventually reaches beyond the home and the family and out into society generally. It also reaches across generations since children of batterers all too often go on to commit the same kind of violence.

Because there is an identifiable cycle of abuse, there are certain extraordinary benefits that accrue when health professionals of all kinds, including veterinarians, work together. The benefits include, of course, immediate relief for the particular individuals involved. But the benefits are also long-term—if the cycle of abuse can be broken, not only existing people and nonhuman animals benefit, but future generations as well.

During your practice of veterinary medicine, you are likely to see very significant changes in reporting requirements regarding such violence. States are increasingly requiring health professionals of all kinds to report violent crimes. For those of you interested in social and legal change, note that the legal system in the U.S. now offers some significant avenues of protection if judges, lawyers, and the public regard this kind of interlocked violence as a form of family violence—for example, because we already recognize the importance of healthy families and the destructiveness of dysfunctional, violent families, judges often intervene to stop violence. If we bring cruelty to family pets into the realm of family law, we benefit not only the companion animals involved but also the humans in that family and those nearby because we give courts the power to address problems before they worsen (thus, a judge might use violence against the family pet as a basis for ordering the batterer to undergo psychiatric counseling, and thus avoid battering of other family members).

What are the different groups who might work in concert to address one or more parts of this complex phenomenon?

They include at least human medical doctors, attorneys, judges, educators, social service agencies, shelters for battered women and children, veterinarians, animal control officers, animal shelters, parole officers, police, emergency medical technicians, and cruelty investigators from groups like the MSPCA and the Animal Rescue League.

Because many of these groups are understaffed in the extreme (particularly social agencies dependent on public funding and shelters), cooperation has some otherwise unattainable benefits. Working together, groups in an effective coalition can accomplish each group's goals better than they can if working in isolation.

And there are potential legal benefits as well. Currently, there are important legal limits on what can be done in some contexts. For example, constitutional restrictions on police and the government generally may, absent the husband's or wife's consent, prevent police or social agencies from gaining entry to a household where a husband is beating his wife (many spouses will not complain because they are afraid of later retaliation against themselves, their children or their pets). Some have suggested that in such cases, cruelty investigators concerned for the family's companion animals may be

able to gain access to the home in some situations where police cannot get a search warrant.

The possibilities of cooperation are, thus, remarkable, given that legal limits in one context may not apply as stringently to other contexts involving related violent acts.

Lacroix 1999 notes that there will be no reduction in family violence until all victims receive satisfactory protection from our laws—that is, leaving one kind of oppression unaddressed threatens to allow violence to raise its ugly head again in the future. Veterinarians in local communities, as well as the AVMA nationally, can play an important role in reducing violence. **Learning to identify the symptoms of abuse in the animal you examine can be an important contribution to early identification of broader problems. A veterinarian who learns when, where, and how to respond to suspected cruelty may thereby help the rest of the family or neighbors avoid escalating violence.** [NOTE: If you are interested in a **local group** that deals with this, contact Link Up Education Network (sponsored by Massachusetts Animal Coalition, 978/779-9880, mac@mail.massanimalcoalition.org).

References

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SUGGESTION for a CLASS GIFT

to this school or the profession generally

Can a graduating class do something “ethical” as a gift to its school?

Memorial benches or sculptures, or purchase of a vitally needed piece of research equipment can make wonderful gifts. *But what if ...* veterinary students from one school could organize veterinary students generally to convince the AVMA to enact an official policy that made a difference in the lives of nonhumans? And what if the same policy also made a difference in the lives of some humans?

Planting a seed ... here’s an idea that some class at TCSVM may enact someday as a way of honoring the school’s traditional commitment to ethics and values—begin the process whereby the AVMA adopts a resolution calling upon veterinarians to help battered women in their local communities by providing shelter for the battered women’s companion animals. FYI—when such shelter is *not* provided, the battered woman is often unwilling to leave her pet behind—the net of effect of such fear is, of course, that she, her children, and the family pet remain subject to violence.

Students have long made big differences at TCSVM regarding ethically-inspired policies—can a graduating class take this tradition a step further and help the AVMA put enlightened policies into place that help both humans and nonhumans?