



Recognising abuse in animals and humans

A SHORT GUIDE FOR THE VETERINARY TEAM



Animal Welfare Foundation

www.bva-awf.org.uk

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession

Registered Charity No. 287118

This short guide provides a quick reference so that the veterinary team feels more confident about approaching suspected cases of animal and/or human abuse.

Members of the veterinary team may occasionally be presented with animals that have suffered abuse, or non-accidental injury. If serious animal abuse is occurring, other forms of domestic or family violence may also be present.

Abuse is not just a companion animal issue; production animal or equine vets may come into contact with it too and should be aware of vulnerable people, trapped on remote farms or smallholdings, unable to drive or access help.

Vets, veterinary nurses and receptionists are in a unique position on the front line when it comes to dealing with domestic abuse. There is a trusted relationship between vet and client, which may lead to members of the veterinary team being in the position of receiving information about abuse in a violent household.

Vets may occasionally have an important role in what may turn out to be a complex multi-agency investigation. Although cases of animal or human abuse may not be common, it is vital that every opportunity to help the victim (animal or human) is taken. By helping vets to be confident in their approach to these distressing cases, doing nothing, through ignorance, is avoided.

The Links Veterinary Training Initiative

Domestic abuse training for vets was developed by Scottish charity Medics Against Violence (MAV) with the Links Group, Crimestoppers, OneKind and Police Scotland's Violence Reduction Unit. This built on the success of a similar initiative for dentists, and trains vets to spot the signs of abuse in animals and their owners and to encourage victims to report to victim support services and the police. The training has continued as the Links Veterinary Training Initiative (LVTI).

A Links Practice Poster sets out four simple steps to help vets seize the 'golden moment' — that opportunity to help a victim of violence: AVDR* — Ask, Validate, Document and Report/Refer' helps the vet to extend sympathy to a victim, while acknowledging that the vet is not an expert in human abuse and limiting the vet's further involvement.

This short guidance and the Practice Poster is supported by a Comprehensive Guidance document produced by the Links Group; all documents are available online. Veterinary practices are encouraged to incorporate the guidance into their practice protocols.

The Links Veterinary Training Initiative (LVTI) provides more guidance on how to use the AVDR technique explained in this leaflet. With the support of the Links Group and the Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) and with funding from the Margaret Giffen Charitable Trust, training is available giving members of the vet team access to face-to-face courses and online courses.

To download the Guidance Documents or the Practice Poster or find out more about training, visit:
www.TheLinksGroup.org.uk

For more information about AVDR in dentists, visit
www.medicsagainstviolence.org.uk

* The AVDR approach was originally developed for dentists by Dr Barbara Gerbert, University of California⁴

A précis of domestic abuse

- Members of the veterinary team do not see incidents of animal or human abuse very often but should be aware that domestic abuse affects one in four women and one in six men in the UK at some point in their life. Domestic abuse occurs across the social spectrum affecting people of all ages, cultures, religions and social classes. The reported incidence is increasing, possibly because more victims have the confidence to come forward.
- Domestic abuse is about one person trying to exert control over another person's life. Unfortunately animals may be caught up in this situation and threats or harm to them may be used to control the human victim.
- The team is absolutely *not* expected to be experts in abuse nor step outside our area of expertise, but we do need to know [how to act appropriately](#).

The [AVDR](#) protocol (see page 5) is used successfully by Medics against Violence in Scotland.

- Get to know your SPCA welfare officer before you have a problem.
- The injured animal is the direct concern of the vet. [If the client chooses to disclose that he or she is a victim](#), members of the vet team should be trained to listen and act appropriately. This may be nothing more than offering a list of telephone numbers to enable the victim to seek help.
- Practices are encouraged to develop relationships with [police domestic abuse officers and aid agencies](#) in their area so that they have expert support who will advise vets and their clients if a **disclosure** is made.
- **At no point does the vet become involved in counselling the victim** and they do not report the domestic abuse.

How A-V-D-R works

Vets are not expected to be experts in abuse: animal abuse will be dealt with by the relevant Society for the Protection of Animals (e.g. RSPCA, SSPCA, USPCA). However, to help vets take advantage of the 'golden moment' (that point where a client seeks help for an abused animal or themselves), the A-V-D-R technique⁴ provides a very simple approach.



= ASK

The concept of 'asking' about abuse may be daunting. Many victims wish to be asked and it may be the first time anyone has shown any interest in, or sympathy towards them. Simple questions such as 'Sometimes when I see injuries like this it means the animal has been hurt by someone they live with. Is this possible?' can be very effective.



= VALIDATE

This follows the 'asking' and provides support to the victim, which shows compassion. Validating statements such as 'I am concerned for your welfare and safety. It's not OK to be hit or hurt' can provide a great deal of comfort and relief and it may encourage the victim to consider getting help.



= DOCUMENT

Documenting by way of contemporaneous notes ensures that the history and presenting signs are properly recorded; cases of animal abuse may come to courts many years later. If a victim discloses significant information about further abuse in the home, this too should be recorded correctly.



= REPORT/REFER

Vets need to report cases of animal abuse to the relevant welfare agency. The vet's main responsibility lies with the animal but they can encourage the human victim to seek help by offering the telephone numbers of aid agencies. This 'light touch' help means a lot to the victim who feels that they are not alone.

< See references on page 10

Documenting

When faced with a suspected case of non-accidental injury the importance of clear, concise and accurate contemporaneous notes cannot be overemphasised.

If escalated, cases may take many months, or even years, to undergo legal processing. These notes are the basis of a report if required by future legal processes. A detailed, well-constructed report may even obviate the necessity to appear in court to undergo cross-examination in the witness box.

Notes may be handwritten or typed but must include:

- Date, time and name of person(s) involved.
- History—include quotations where possible.
- Physical examination—be specific, use numerical values where possible.
- Investigations undertaken and results obtained.
- Consents given/withheld by the owner.
- Where possible include photographs with date and time.
- Keep a log of all images, samples or telephone calls made, including dates, times, personnel involved and advice given.

Notes should be objective and factual. Avoid the use of abbreviations. Never omit or remove information. If an alteration is required, the original detail should be left, amendments made, then signed and dated. Above all, record everything and keep it organised.

The question of confidentiality

The following extract is taken from the 'Client Confidentiality' supporting guidance in the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons and the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses.

See: www.rcvs.org.uk/confidentiality

Read the full RCVS guidance at
www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance

Disclosing to the authorities

14.9 Veterinary nurses employed by a veterinary surgeon or practice should discuss the issues with a senior veterinary surgeon in the practice before breaching client confidentiality.

14.10 Where a decision is made to release confidential information, veterinary surgeons or veterinary nurses should be prepared to justify their decision and any action taken. They should ensure that their decision making process, including any discussions with the client or colleagues, is comprehensively documented.

14.11 Veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses who wish to seek advice on matters of confidentiality and disclosing confidential information are encouraged to contact the RCVS Professional Conduct Department on 020 7202 0789.

Animal welfare concerns

14.13 When a veterinary surgeon is presented with an injured animal whose clinical signs cannot be attributed to the history provided by the client, s/he should include non-accidental injury in their differential diagnosis. 'Recognising abuse in animals and humans' provides guidance for the veterinary team on dealing with situations where non-accidental injury is suspected.

14.14 If there is suspicion of animal abuse (which could include neglect) as a result of examining an animal, in the first instance, where appropriate, the veterinary surgeon should attempt to discuss his/her concerns with the client.

14.15 In cases where this would not be appropriate, or where the client's response increases rather than allays concerns, the veterinary surgeon should consider whether the circumstances are sufficiently serious to justify disclosing their client's information without consent. If so, the suspected abuse should be reported to the relevant authorities, for example: the RSPCA (Tel: 0300 1234 999 – 24-hour line) in England and Wales; the SSPCA (Tel: 03000 999 999 – 7am to 11pm) in Scotland; or the Animal Welfare Officer for the relevant local authority in Northern Ireland.

14.16 Such action should only be taken when the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse considers on reasonable grounds that an animal shows signs of abuse or is at real and immediate risk of abuse—in effect, where the public interest in protecting an animal overrides the professional obligation to maintain client confidentiality.

IF YOU SUSPECT ANIMAL ABUSE

History

Review clinical history for any previous NAI

- Inconsistent
- Repetitive
- Discrepant
- Other animals involved
- Previous vet practices attended

Initial examination

SUSPECTED NON-ACCIDENTAL INJURY

Informal discussion (non-disclosure)

Consult colleagues/possibly animal welfare agency

Take further history

There may be disclosure of violence to humans in household

USE **A-V-D-R**

A

ASK: 'Sometimes when I see injuries like this it means the animal has been hurt by someone they live with; is this possible?'

SUSPICIONS OF NON-ACCIDENTAL INJURY CONFIRMED

PERPETRATOR

TAKE CARE:
ask non-judgemental questions

V

VICTIM



VALIDATE:

'Your animal does not deserve to be injured, no matter what happened; how can we help?'

Further clinical investigation +/- appropriate treatment

Admit animal for observation (getting permission for any procedures, including photos if possible)

Client leaves animal

Consult with colleagues/
VDS/RCVS/animal welfare
agency/local police
community officer

Client will not leave animal

Owner to sign form
'Animal removed
against vet's advice'

D

DOCUMENT: Clear, precise, contemporaneous notes

R

REPORT: to animal welfare agency

IF YOU SUSPECT DOMESTIC ABUSE

If abuse to a child or vulnerable adult is disclosed, you should consider telling the police or social services

INVOKE **A-V-D-R**

A

ASK: 'How are things at home?'

CONCERNS 'RELIEVED'

Ensure clinical notes are appropriate



If your concerns about non-accidental injury or domestic violence are not completely allayed, make a note of your suspicion in the clinical notes in a 'confidential' part of the client record; discuss with your practice colleagues/ VDS/RCVS/Police Domestic Abuse Unit/ Crimestoppers/NSPCC

V

FURTHER DISCLOSURE



VALIDATE

Show compassion: 'I am concerned for your safety and wellbeing; you do not deserve to be hurt, no matter what has happened'

→ Continued disclosure of violence to vulnerable humans (including the adults, children or the elderly) in household

Offer the contacts card

Consult with colleagues/
RCVS/animal welfare agency/
local police community officer/
VDS/RCVS/
Police Domestic Abuse Unit/
Crimestoppers/NSPCC

D

DOCUMENT: Clear, precise, contemporaneous notes

R

REFER:

- Encourage the victim to seek help; offer the contacts card; make arrangements for the animal's care
- If the victim asks for help, phone the appropriate number
- If victim declines to seek help but you believe they are in immediate danger, phone Crimestoppers

< References and further reading

1. Animal Abuse and Unlawful Killing: Forensic Veterinary Pathology, (2008) Ranald Munro and Helen M.C. Munro, Saunders Elsevier.
2. The Links Group: Veterinary Guidance, (2016) available online www.thelinksgroup.org.uk
3. Changing dentists' knowledge, attitudes and behavior regarding domestic violence through an interactive multimedia tutorial, (2006) Nancy Kwon Hsieh, Karen Herzig, Stuart A. Gansky, Dale Danley and Barbara Gerbert, *The Journal of the American Dental Association*, 137, 596–603
4. Animal abuse and intimate partner violence: Researching the link and its significance in Ireland—a veterinary perspective, (2008) B. Gallagher, M. Allen and B. Jones. *Irish Veterinary Journal*, 61, 658–667
5. Battered pets, (2001) HMC Munro, MV Thrusfield. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 42, 218–226; 279–290 and 385–389
6. *The International Handbook of Animal Abuse and Cruelty*. (2008) Ascione, F.R, Editor Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana.
7. Identifying non-accidental injury cases in veterinary practice, (2016) L Tong *In Practice*, 38, 59-68

Useful contact information

RSPCA

0300 123 4999
www.rspca.org.uk

SSPCA

03000 999 999
www.scottishspca.org

USPCA

028 3025 1000
www.uspca.co.uk

RCVS

Professional Conduct
Dept: 020 7202 0789

Veterinary Defence Society

01565 652 737

British Veterinary Association

020 7636 6541

Crimestoppers

0800 555 111

NSPCC

0808 800 5000

Police:

101 (non-emergencies) 999 (if someone is in immediate danger)

Local police domestic abuse contact:

Women's Aid and Refuge

0808 2000 247 • www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

Free 24-hour national domestic violence helpline. Provides access to an interpreter for non-English-speaking callers.

The Men's Advice Line

0808 8010327 • www.mensadviceline.org.uk

Free helpline for men experiencing domestic violence and abuse.

Broken Rainbow UK

0800 999 5428 or 0300 999 5428 • www.brokenrainbow.org.uk

Advice and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people experiencing domestic violence.

PET FOSTERING SERVICES

A number of organisations provide pet fostering services for families escaping domestic violence. Contact the appropriate organisation to find out if it currently operates in your area.

Dogs Trust Freedom Project

www.dogstrustfreedomproject.org.uk

0800 298 9199 (London) and 0800 083 4322 (Yorkshire)

Paws for Kids

www.pawsforkids.org.uk • 01204 394 842



Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF)

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession. Our mission is to give animals a good life by using veterinary knowledge to improve their welfare. We promote responsible pet ownership and improve animal welfare through our range of educational resources for the public and the veterinary profession. Our events encourage debate on animal welfare issues and support veterinary education. We invest in veterinary research that has the potential to make measureable and lasting improvements to animal welfare.

www.bva-awf.org.uk



Links Group

The Links Group is a committed multi-agency interest group that promotes the welfare and safety of vulnerable children, animals and adults so that they are free from violence and abuse.

www.thelinksgroup.org.uk



Medics Against Violence

We are a healthcare charity and aim to prevent violence in all its forms. Domestic abuse can affect anyone but is still a subject even healthcare professionals find difficult to talk about. The AVDR programme developed in the USA is a great example of best practice in the area of domestic abuse and could be applied to many healthcare settings.

www.medicsagainstviolence.co.uk

Registered charity: SC041153

Produced with the support of the **Margaret Giffen Charitable Trust**

Recognising abuse in animals and humans, March 2016

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