



**Paula Boyden** BVetMed MRCVS

Paula graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in 1992. She spent 11 years in general practice before moving into industry in 2003. Paula joined Dogs Trust as Deputy Veterinary Director in 2010 and was promoted to Veterinary Director in 2011.

Paula is currently treasurer of the Links Group (which raises awareness of the links between violence to people and violence to animals), a founder member of the Association of Charity Vets and board member of the Blue Dog Trust (which focuses on dog-bite prevention). She is also a member of the British Veterinary Association's Veterinary Policy Group and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association's International Advisory Committee.

# The Links Group

**Paula Boyden** BVetMed MRCVS

Veterinary Director, Dogs Trust, 17 Wakley Street, London, EC1V 7RQ

## The 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.'

## Introduction

The Links Group was set up in 2001 following a conference held in London that highlighted the links between violence to people and violence to animals. In extreme cases we see this with serial killers who begin or practice violent behaviour on animals before moving on to their human victims. However, we must put serial killers to one side; what we are primarily dealing with is violence in the home situation – domestic abuse. Whilst we must not assume that every person who abuses their partner will abuse the family pet(s) (or vice versa), there has been sufficient increase in research and clinical evidence for this link to be considered a risk factor.

For those of us in the veterinary profession, it can be quite a challenge to understand why a person would deliberately hurt an animal yet subsequently present it to a veterinary practice for attention. It is about power and control of a perpetrator over his or her victim. The violence towards a family pet is used to coerce and control the victim. Given this association, it should come as no great surprise that the sorts of injuries seen, and excuses offered, are not dissimilar, whether we are referring to animal or human abuse, because there is one common denominator – the human perpetrator.

Whilst it is acknowledged that men can be victims of domestic abuse and that women can be perpetrators, the majority of perpetrators are male.

## Recognising abuse

### What do we mean by abuse?

When dealing with suspected cases of abuse, it is important that we are fully conversant with what is meant by the various terminologies, both within the veterinary profession, and with other professions that may be involved in such cases. There are four main types of abuse:

1. *Physical*: also known as non-accidental injury (NAI), battered child syndrome, battered pet syndrome
2. *Sexual*: use of an animal or child for sexual gratification
3. *Emotional*: threatening behaviour, verbal harassment
4. *Neglect*: failure to provide the basic necessities of life – shelter, food and water, veterinary/medical treatment, affection/companionship

### What to look for

Identifying cases of abuse is a challenging area – no single pointer is diagnostic. It is a combination of clinical signs which raises concern, and that combination is variable. Key points to consider are:

- *History inconsistent with the injury*: generally the clinical signs are too severe for the given history
- *Discrepant history*: the history changes, either from the same person presenting the patient, or by different family members giving differing stories
- *Repetitive injuries*: this should raise a strong index of suspicion, as should the family that has had multiple animals, often with no knowledge of what has happened to them

It is important that as professionals we do not step outside our area of expertise. Our role is not to make a diagnosis of abuse, merely to share our concerns accordingly.

DOI: 10.1080/17415349.2015.1028767

## The Links Group

The Links Group ([www.thelinksgroup.org.uk](http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk)) was set up to encourage those agencies involved in such cases – vets, doctors, police, social services, NSPCC, RSPCA (or equivalent animal welfare agency) – to communicate and cross report; this is our greatest tool in being able to break the link. Clearly any such communication must be within the relevant professional code of conduct (see later). Membership of the group includes: BVA, BVNA, Dogs Trust, MSD Animal Health, NSPCC, OneKind, Paws for Kids, PDSA and RSPCA.

## Achievements of the Group

### Change to the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct

The Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses provides, in the Supporting Guidance, section 14 (Client Confidentiality) reference to dealing with cases of suspected abuse. Particular reference should be given to paragraph 14.5:

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

### Guidance document for professionals

A guidance document for use by the whole veterinary team can be found on the Links Group website. It covers our responsibilities under the Animal Welfare Acts, recognising abuse, approaching a case, the issue of confidentiality, cross reporting and the all-important establishment of a practice protocol.

### Undergraduate teaching established at six of the UK vet schools

This training, generously supported by MSD Animal Health since its inception, raises awareness of this issue amongst the vets of tomorrow and includes:

- Identification of abuse
- What we can and cannot do
- Legislation surrounding such cases

### Pet fostering sub-group

On average, a woman is assaulted 35 times before her first call to the police

(Women's Aid). Victims may delay fleeing a violent situation because they do not wish to leave the family pet behind at the hands of the perpetrator. Sadly this delay can cost human lives, which shows the importance to fleeing victims of pet-fostering services.

Pet-fostering services are run by a number of organisations to allow victims to flee a violent situation in the knowledge that their pet is safe, and, just as importantly, once they have relocated they will be reunited with their beloved pets. The dedication, tact and diplomacy of those involved in providing fostering must not be underestimated; they are dealing with very vulnerable victims in very challenging situations.

In a Dogs Trust survey, 52% of the 154 responding clients on the Freedom Project said their pets had been abused or threatened with abuse.

### Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative (DAVI)

In October 2011 the Links Group became part of the Scottish programme Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative (DAVI) in conjunction with Medics Against Violence, Crimestoppers and the Violence Reduction Unit of Police Scotland. To date, two pilot training sessions have taken place in Scotland and it is hoped to extend this training to the rest of the United Kingdom.

The training, which is aimed at the whole practice team, serves to:

- provide the information and reassurance required by the veterinary team if they suspect that a patient or client may have been a victim of abuse
- enable safe reporting of suspected cases
- provide practical assistance to people with pets who wish to escape domestic abuse
- highlight the links between abuse of animals and violence towards people

## Recent developments

### Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) leaflet

The AWF was set up by the BVA in 1983 by vets with a passion to alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering in all animals, including farm animals, wild animals and pets and, ultimately, to improve the welfare of animals.

Following a presentation by the Links Group Chair, Dr Freda Scott-Park, at the AWF discussion forum in 2013, the AWF secured funding to highlight awareness to animal health professionals of the links between violence to people and violence to animals. As part of this a guidance booklet for the veterinary team which will complement the guidance document is being produced.

## How can VNs make a difference?

The role of the veterinary nurse cannot be under-estimated when dealing with suspected cases of abuse. Often clients feel much more comfortable disclosing information to a VN than they do a vet. This emphasises that dealing with suspected cases involves the whole practice team and that only by pooling information are some cases brought to light. The following are some points to bear in mind:

- *Do not step outside your area of expertise:* Do read the guidance document on the Links Group website. No one is expected to step outside their area of expertise, just to share concerns appropriately.
- *Be aware of the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct:* We are fortunate in the UK that there is provision in the Code – the reader is referred specifically to Supporting Guidance section 14 (client confidentiality).
- *Ensure there is a practice protocol for dealing with such cases:* The guidance document will give some pointers but every practice should be encouraged to develop its own practice protocol. This includes nominating a go-to person who can collate the necessary information. That person does not need to be the most senior person in the practice.

- *Be aware of pet-fostering services:* Pet-fostering services cover much of the UK. Be aware of any services in your area so that you can point people in the right direction. You might even consider being a foster carer yourself.
- *Get to know your local SPCA inspector:* By getting to know your local SPCA inspector you will develop your own informal source of information.
- *Contemporaneous notes:* Make sure that contemporaneous notes are kept. With most practices being computerised, this is much easier to do. Cases of suspected animal abuse may take many months to resolve – good note-taking is a must.
- *Talk to your colleagues:* The most important factor in breaking the link is communication and information

sharing. If you have concerns about a particular patient or client, do talk things through with your colleagues. It may be that they know something you don't.

- *Links with other key organisations:* Other key organisations that might be involved in such cases include social services, the police and domestic-violence services. Be aware of these organisations and know how to contact them. While the VN's role is not to step outside their area of expertise, offering a hand of friendship might be the first time that this has happened to a victim. Pointing them in the right direction may just help seize that golden moment.

#### Further reading

Munro, R. & Munro, H. M. C. (2008). *Animal Abuse and Unlawful Killing: Veterinary Forensic Pathology*. Oxford: Saunders Elsevier.

Munro, H. M. C. & Thrusfield, M.V. (2001). 'Battered Pets': features that raise suspicion of non-accidental injury. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 42:218–226.

Munro, H. M. C. & Thrusfield, M.V. (2001). 'Battered Pets': non-accidental physical injuries found in dogs and cats. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 42:279–290.

Munro, H. M. C. & Thrusfield, M.V. (2001). 'Battered Pets': sexual abuse. *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 42:333–337.

Munro, H. M. C. & Thrusfield, M.V. (2001). 'Battered Pets': Munchausen syndrome by proxy (factitious illness by proxy). *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, 42:385–389.

Ascione, F. (Ed.). (2008). *The International Handbook of Animal Abuse and Cruelty* (2008). West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press.

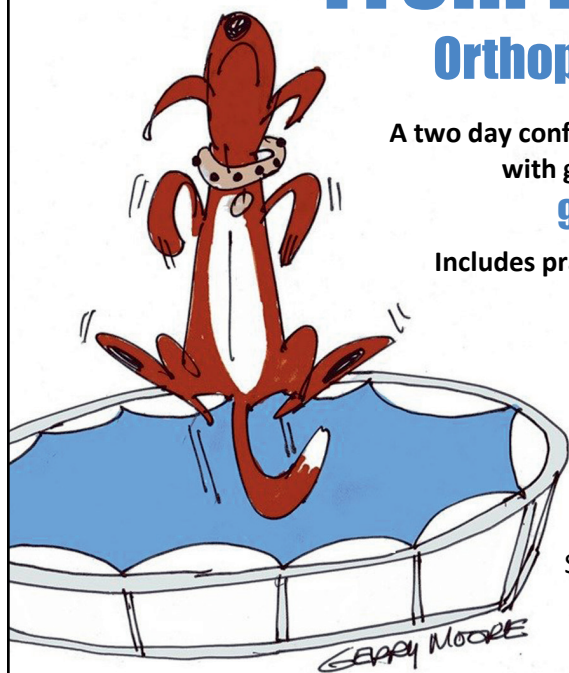
Recognising Abuse in Animals and Humans [Online]. Available from: [http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk/site/pdf/Recognising\\_Abuse\\_FINAL\\_Sep\\_2013.pdf](http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk/site/pdf/Recognising_Abuse_FINAL_Sep_2013.pdf) (Accessed February 19, 2015).

RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses [Online]. Available from: <http://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/> (Accessed February 19, 2015).

29th & 30th May 2015

# From Broken to Bouncing

## Orthopaedic Surgery & Rehabilitation



A two day conference at the Armagh City Hotel, Armagh, Northern Ireland  
with general and advanced lecture streams for vets and

**9 hours of focused CPD for vet nurses**

Includes practical physiotherapy sessions for both vets and nurses.

**Prof. Sorrel Langley-Hobbs**

Chair in Small Animal Orthopaedic Surgery  
University of Bristol

**Mr Ignacio Calvo**

Senior Surgeon, Fitzpatrick Referrals

**Ms Gillian Calvo**

Senior Practitioner Nurse, Fitzpatrick Referrals

**Mr Brian Sharp**

Veterinary Physiotherapist, CaninePhysio

This Small Animal Veterinary Conference is a joint event organised by the  
**Association of Veterinary Surgeons Practising in Northern Ireland** and the **British Veterinary Nursing Association**  
For full programme details and exhibitor opportunities, contact [info@vetni.co.uk](mailto:info@vetni.co.uk)