Several months ago, an eight-year-old, male cockapoo named Hershey was presented to the North Carolina State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital for evaluation and treatment of acute paraplegia (paralysis of the hindlimbs). When asked about the events that might have caused the condition, the owner admitted that her boyfriend had thrown the dog against a wall. Hershey's vertebral column had a step fracture at T₁₂–T₁₃ (Figure 1). The owner decided to have the pet euthanatized.

What would you do in such a situation? Hershey clearly did not live in a safe environment; euthanasia was a choice in the case. In many cases, however, animals may sustain severe injury (perhaps of unknown cause), obtain treatment at a veterinary hospital, and return to an uncertain environment.

How can we decide whether an animal has been the subject of abuse or cruelty and whether action should be taken? What action can we take? Cruelty to companion animals is not easy to define and can be difficult to prove.

**Anticruelty Legislation**

Several laws try to define animal cruelty and provide penalties. In the past, such laws were primarily intended to protect personal property, including animals; society had no desire to protect the property from its own. The animals protected by these early laws were those perceived as valuable by society, namely, livestock. The legal system did not protect dogs and other companion animals; special statutes protected dog abusers from penalty.

Cruelty legislation based on concern for animals was introduced during the late 1800s in the form of so-called overdrive laws, which penalized overworking or excessively beating an animal. Legislators of the period, who did not favor pro-animal thinking, justified these early animal welfare laws as promoting the humaneness of society in general.

In 1969, a new set of anticruelty laws provided a civil remedy to protect animals. The laws defined cruelty as "every act, omission or neglect whereby unjustifiable physical pain, suffering or death is caused or permitted" and allowed adoption of the abused animal by the person who placed the complaint. Excluded from consideration were activities of the Wildlife Resources Commission, biomedical research or training facilities, sport animals, and livestock or poultry farming (including allowances for killing animals believed to threaten livestock or poultry production).

These laws were augmented in 1977 by a set of laws (nicknamed the Animal Welfare Act) that specifically protects dogs and cats in pet shops and kennels. The act requires adequate housing and that food and water be provided to dogs and cats at least every 24 hours. Veterinary care is required for animals with physical signs of infection, communicable disease, or congenital abnormality. Penalties include fines of up to $1000 as well as the impoundment and sale or euthanasia of the involved animals.

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) often extends these laws to investigations of cruelty cases that involve the general public. Cases reviewed by the society usually begin with a tip from a concerned neighbor, passerby, or veterinarian who notices that an animal is ill or emaciated. The most common incidents involve tight dog collars or restrictive leashes; cats caught in pest traps under or near houses; horses poorly cared for by owners with insufficient time, money, or land; and cattle left to fend for themselves during the winter.

**Difficult Decisions**

A box turtle was presented to the North Carolina State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital for evaluation after the animal was found with a nail driven through its body (Figure 2). The new owner wanted to know whether to try to pull the nail out. Removal was recommended, but the pa-
Figure 1—Lateral radiograph of an owner-induced step fracture of the canine vertebral column between the 11th and 12th thoracic vertebrae.

If a cat has not been vaccinated for several years, should the owner be considered negligent or cruel? What about owners who know of the potential damage inflicted by heartworms but refuse to give their dogs preventative medication? Should the owner of a severely parasitized dog (Figure 3) be reported to the SPCA? How should equine veterinary staff respond when a Tennessee walking horse is presented wearing excessive pads, and how can clients be encouraged to follow the USDA guidelines for pad sizing?

Should canine confinement laws be enforced? Although no one likes to see animals chained outside, we recognize the dangers of letting them run free and unsupervised. Should veterinary professionals refuse to crop the ears of dogs? In Great Britain, ear cropping is illegal and most practitioners refuse to do so.

It is difficult but necessary to decide how to deal with possible cases of animal cruelty. Veterinarians and veterinary technicians are entrusted with providing medical care to animals in the hospital but may have doubts about the ability or willingness of owners to follow up with appropriate care at home. Obvious causes for concern include animals with severely matted hair, infected skin, maggots, chronically draining tracts, or collars and halters that are tight enough to cut through the skin or become buried in granulation tissue. Some pets, like Hershey, have been thrown against a wall for whining too much.

Peaches, a three-year-old, female cocker spaniel, was presented to the North Carolina State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital for evaluation of acute right forelimb lameness. The current owner suspected that the former owner had found Peaches and beaten her. The dog also had a history of chronic left forelimb lameness. The acute lameness in the right forelimb was the result of a comminuted Y-shaped fracture that involved both humeral condyles and the humeroradial joint (Figure 4).

The left forelimb had an old fracture that involved the lateral humeral condyle (Figure 5). Malunion had occurred, and Peaches now had extensive secondary joint disease in the left elbow. The patient was discharged after surgical fixation of the right humerus. Satisfactory healing was expected, assuming that the former owner did not return to abuse Peaches again. Six weeks later, the dog was returned to the hospital by an SPCA representative. Peaches had been abandoned with the Kirschner apparatus still in place. Two weeks and yet another owner later, the right forelimb had healed and the apparatus was removed.

Appropriate Responses
Veterinary staff who treat abused patients are in an awkward position. It is possible to educate owners about animal cruelty without offending them and thus losing the opportunity to help the animals? Clients may own the animals and pay the bills, but we have an obligation to help patients and to prevent and relieve their suffering. Talk to the client forcefully but tactfully, stressing the importance of the welfare of the animal. As child abuse can be perpetrated by people with abusive parents, owners may neglect and be cruel to animals if they have not been educated to a better standard.

Unlike people who handle cases of child abuse, veterinary staff are not legally bound to report suspected abuse. As part of your moral duty to animals, however, it may be necessary to refer a case to the SPCA or to the community's animal care and control investigators, who have the authority to visit the premises where the animal lives and assess the adequacy of the environment. Such referrals can be anonymous if regular veterinary care for the animal is thus promoted.

After an animal is seized by the SPCA, a veterinarian may be asked to examine the animal and administer necessary treatment. The SPCA usually chooses veterinarians based on their proximity to the site of the incident and to the SPCA facility. Such medical services are often provided at no charge.

In abuse or cruelty allegations that involve large animals, it may be necessary to board the patient at a clinic or suitable farm until the matter is resolved. Resolution can take months or years. Cases that go to court usually require the testimony of an expert witness (i.e., the veterinarian) to provide clinical impressions of the animal's
care and health and of the possible source of the problems. Such testimony is usually crucial to the outcome of the case.

A golden retriever was recently shot by a man who believed that the dog should be killed for trespassing. Although self-defense was not an issue in the case, the defendant claimed it. A North Carolina judge found the man guilty of animal cruelty, fined him $1000, and sentenced him to six months in jail. The decision would have been impossible without the veterinarian's testimony of the severe injuries sustained by the dog.

**Documentation of Cruelty**

Accurate medical records are essential in cases of suspected cruelty. If possible, photographs of the animal should be taken (preferably in its home environment) and relevant evidence should be saved. If it is necessary to cut off a tight collar, measure its inside circumference and the circumference of the patient's neck. Weigh the patient to document emaciation and dehydration. Obtain a blood sample to determine baseline packed cell volume and total solids. For large animals, take a tape measurement of the patient's girth.

The more evidence that is collected to document the severity of the patient's condition, the easier it will be to pursue legal action. Together with a deputy sheriff, an animal cruelty investigator or the SPCA can legally charge an owner with animal cruelty; however, these authorities usually rely on the medical record and the veterinarian's testimony to prove that cruelty has occurred.

**Conclusion**

Legislation and court battles alone will not end the problem of animal cruelty. Decreasing the number of unwanted and poorly treated animals will be beneficial; such a decrease depends on client cooperation and understanding.

Veterinarians and technicians can promote responsible pet care by giving husbandry advice, explaining vaccination schedules, dispensing information about heartworm disease, encouraging obedience training, and scheduling prompt ovariohysterectomies and castrations. Good veterinary care and client education are essential to the humane treatment and control of animals.
Figure 5—Lateral radiograph of a canine left forelimb. An old fracture of the distal humerus has not healed correctly and is causing secondary joint disease.

of animals. Because we all share the responsibility of relieving animal suffering, we must decide how to respond to cases of animal abuse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Exotics (continued from page 57)

on the neck scruff and can bite suddenly if the technician does not gather enough of this skin to control the head and neck movements.

Conclusion

Restraint of patients for examination or treatment is an important task because the safety of the patient, the technician, and the examiner may be at risk. Nearly all veterinary practices, regardless of the type, are presented with occasional nondomestic pets. Knowledge of proper handling techniques is essential.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


