Veterinary Forensics

by Dr. Rachel Touroo, Animal Care Conference Speaker

Dr. Rachel Touroo, Director of Veterinary Forensic Sciences for the ASPCA, will be providing an introduction to veterinary forensic pathology at the upcoming Animal Care Conference on February 25th in Sacramento, California. For more information regarding the ASPCA online veterinary forensics certificate program, offered through the University of Florida, visit http://forensics.med.ufl.edu/ or contact Dr. Rachel Touroo at Rachel.touroo@aspca.org.

Veterinarians are often the first line of defense against animal abuse. They frequently serve as first responders in recognizing and reporting animal cruelty. However, veterinarians traditionally have not been trained to identify signs that might suggest animal abuse. Additionally, most veterinarians think that owners who care enough about their animals to provide veterinary care are unlikely to abuse their animals. This is not always the case. The largest barrier to diagnosing abuse is the existence of emotional blocks in the minds of veterinary professionals. The most important step in diagnosing animal abuse is to force oneself to consider this as a differential diagnosis when there is suspicion of non-accidental injury. It is essential for veterinarians to be involved in cases of animal abuse, as they are the rational and natural advocates for animals.

Society demands the investigation of crimes against animals. These crimes affect more than just animals as there is a strong link between human violence and animal cruelty. Crimes against animals can be a warning sign of future violent acts and individuals who witness animal cruelty can become desensitized to violence. Animal abuse may also occur in conjunction with other crimes such as domestic violence and illegal sales of drugs and guns. Having taken an oath, veterinarians have a duty not only to protect and serve animals but humans as well. By addressing animal abuse, veterinarians have the potential to save human and animal life as well as reduce suffering.

Veterinary forensics is an emerging branch of veterinary medicine. Veterinarians have an array of duties within veterinary forensic science, which is the application of a broad spectrum of sciences to answer questions of interest to a court of law. The term “forensic medicine” is used to encompass all aspects of forensic work of a medical nature. In the past, this term was often used interchangeably with “forensic pathology.” Forensic pathology, however, refers to the branch of forensic medicine which deals with death investigations. Nowadays, the term “clinical forensic medicine” is applied to the branch of forensic medicine involving the living.

In some ways, the role of the forensic veterinarian can be compared to that of a human medical examiner. The duties of a forensic veterinarian, however, are broader because they can include the triage, examination, treatment, and continuing care of live victims, necropsy of deceased victims, evidence identification and assessment, assessment of the scene and its effects on the victims, and expert witness testimony. Unlike human forensic cases, animal abuse investigations typically do not have access to supporting forensic specialists, such as a forensic veterinarian; therefore, vital evidence may go undetected, may not be collected, processed or analyzed, or may not withstand scrutiny in court.

A forensic medical examination is essential in prosecuting a case of animal abuse. It often allows the forensic veterinarian to provide a detailed narrative of how an animal may have suffered or died. It provides a voice for the victim. Unfortunately, there is a significant lack
of training among veterinary professionals and within the veterinary curriculum in recognizing, reporting, and documenting crimes against animals.

In response to this lack of training the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in conjunction with the University of Florida recently began to offer a novel online veterinary forensic sciences graduate certificate course. The certificate program is comprised of five three-credit courses, including animal crime scene processing, scientific and legal principles of forensic evidence, cruelty to animals and interpersonal violence, veterinary forensic pathology, and forensic entomology. This program promotes the application of forensic sciences to veterinary medicine to aid in the understanding, prevention and prosecution of animal cruelty and is dedicated to meeting the veterinary forensic science needs of individuals and agencies worldwide, including education, research and applied casework. It is our long-term goal that the basic principles of veterinary forensic science become part of the core training for all veterinarians so that they may be better prepared to respond to — and in some cases prevent — animal cruelty.

Rachel Touroo, DVM

Dr. Touroo joined the ASPCA of Gainesville, Florida in March 2012 as the director of Veterinary Forensics. She assists with crime scene investigations in animal cruelty cases throughout the United States, including the examination of live and deceased victims and providing expertise and training to law enforcement and animal care and control agencies. In addition, Dr. Touroo plays an integral role in the ASPCA Veterinary Forensic Sciences Program at the University of Florida.