

UK vets need special training to report suspected animal abuse

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UK vets need special training to report cases of suspected animal abuse and neglect, finds research published online in *Vet Record*.

This is key to boosting their confidence and skills in overcoming existing fears around breaching client confidentiality and loss of earnings, say the researchers.

Animal abuse has been linked to abuse of people and other criminal and antisocial behaviours, so vets have a crucial role in detecting it, with the attendant potential of preventing future crime, say the researchers.

Reporting [animal abuse](#) is not mandatory in the UK, but because [animals](#) can't speak for themselves, they are particularly vulnerable, they add.

While the reluctance to report abuse has been studied, few studies have looked at the [psychological factors](#) behind this, particularly in the UK context.

To try and plug this gap, the researchers drew on the responses of 176 UK vets to a survey advertised through social media channels, [news outlets](#), membership mailing lists and direct contact with vet practices.

The survey aimed to find out what factors might most influence vets' ability to suspect and report animal abuse. These included perceived 'self-efficacy'—in other words, the skills and confidence needed; experience (years in practice); and specific [training](#) on handling suspected abuse.

Self efficacy has proved a key factor in teachers' and paediatricians' ability to report [child abuse](#).

Most of the respondents were women (71%), and nearly all of them worked in a practice dedicated to pets (90%). Years in practice ranged from 1 to 45, with the average being 14.

The average amount of time spent receiving special training on detecting and reporting animal abuse was under 2 hours.

Around a third (32%; 57) said they had seen a case of suspected animal abuse within the preceding 12 months, but fewer than half (46%; 25) had actually reported it to the authorities.

"With these findings in mind, it is unsurprising that animal abuse is such a difficult behaviour to prosecute and secure a successful conviction," comment the researchers.

Analysis of the vets' responses showed that all three of the studied factors influenced reporting behaviour.

But self efficacy was associated with years in practice and the amount of special training received on how to pick up and handle animal abuse.

And unlike years of practice and special training, it was the only factor that was independently associated with reporting abuse, and remained so, even after taking account of these other factors.

"However, perceived self efficacy does not happen on its own, as found in other settings, such as academia and sport; rather it is learned," write the researchers.

The lack of statutory obligation to report animal abuse compounds

"additional barriers such as client confidentiality issues and fear of loss in business earnings," they add.

"Most importantly, we can not be surprised by low reporting rates if veterinarians receive less than 2 hours of training on how to deal with suspected cases and this is echoed consistently in previous studies."

There may now be an argument for making the reporting of animal abuse compulsory, they suggest.

Their research is limited by the self selected nature of the participants, so the responses may not therefore be representative of all vets working in pet health or those in other specialties, or other practitioners, such as veterinary nurses, they note.

But they conclude: "Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates the importance of perceived self efficacy in the reporting of animal abuse, and that specialised training can develop it."

Daniella Dos Santos, British Veterinary Association (BVA) President, commented: "The link between animal cruelty and acting violently towards people is well documented, so it's vital that vets feel both equipped and empowered to challenge and report suspected [abuse](#) as well as signposting victims to appropriate support. Training and awareness raising helps vets both spot warning signs and feel confident acting on them."

More information: To report, or not to report, animal abuse: the role of perceived self-efficacy in veterinarians' decision-making, *Vet Record*, [DOI: 10.1136/vetrec-2018-105077](https://doi.org/10.1136/vetrec-2018-105077)

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