

Veterinary Forensics Advances

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Introduction

The role of the veterinary forensic pathologist in the investigation of animal abuse or neglect can go beyond documenting the condition of animals presented as evidence. Although animal cruelty is a moral concern and a crime in itself, law enforcement response to such crimes is often enhanced by the recognition that crimes against animals can be both indicators of other ongoing crimes against people and predictors of the potential for interpersonal violence. An understanding of common motives underlying animal cruelty can aid the pathologist in asking appropriate questions. The authors review the forms of pathology evidence commonly seen in various presentations of animal cruelty. Understanding these forms of evidence can help the pathologist describe findings that can be significant for assessing the potential risks the alleged perpetrator may pose to other animals and humans.

Internationally, forensic medicine and pathology are increasingly recognized as an important aspect of work done by veterinary clinicians and veterinary pathologists. In this article, a forensic veterinary clinician, a forensic veterinary pathologist in private practice, and a forensic veterinary pathologist at a veterinary school discuss the interactions among veterinary clinicians, veterinary pathologists, and law enforcement agencies and how future interactions can be improved. The focus is on the United Kingdom, but many of the principles, challenges, and suggestions are applicable to other jurisdictions. Clinicians and pathologists require forensic training to enable them to apply their veterinary knowledge to suspected cases of animal abuse and to subsequently present their findings and conclusions to a court of law in a concise, professional, and unbiased manner, and some opportunities for such advanced training in the United Kingdom are indicated. It is important that forensic veterinary clinicians and pathologists interact in an unbiased and collegial manner to answer the questions posed by courts of law. Opportunities for improved training, communication, and interaction among forensic veterinarians, forensic scientists, and law enforcement are discussed.

Veterinary forensic medicine is the application of veterinary medicine to answer questions of interest to a court of law; it includes

the examination and assessment of animals that have been or are suspected to have been injured or killed by an external influence. Veterinary forensic pathology is part of veterinary forensic medicine but deals specifically with the forensic postmortem examination of a deceased animal and is often performed by a veterinary pathologist. The veterinary pathologist not only performs the forensic postmortem examination (also known as the forensic autopsy or forensic necropsy) and documents examination findings but also participates in evidence collection and court proceedings, including giving depositions and trial testimony. Postmortem examinations may also be performed by a veterinary practitioner for a number of reasons, including lack of access to a veterinary pathologist and financial constraints. Generally speaking, the veterinary pathologist will encounter a wide variety of forensic cases including those that involve sharp force trauma, projectile injuries, blunt force trauma, animal sexual abuse, intoxications, fire-related injuries, and neglect. Detailed discussion of these types of cases is beyond the scope of this article but is available in a number of reference textbooks.^{1,2} When presented with an animal for forensic postmortem examination, the main question usually asked is what is the cause of death or injury. By definition, the cause of death is the injury or disease that produces a physiologic derangement in the body that results in the death of the individual.³ The cause of death can be further broken down into proximate and immediate.

The proximate cause of death is the principal event that initiated the chain of events leading to death, and the immediate cause of death is the concluding or final event that actually produces death. For example, for a dog that is shot in the abdomen and survives the gunshot injury only to die days later of septic peritonitis, the proximate cause of death is the abdominal gunshot injury and the immediate cause of death is the septic peritonitis. Were it not for the gunshot injury, the chain of events leading to death would not have transpired.

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