

# 'Battered pets': sexual abuse

**A study of non-accidental injury in small animals in the UK, based on responses from a random sample of small animal practitioners, identified 6 per cent of the 448 reported cases as being sexual in nature. Twenty-one cases occurred in dogs, five in cats and two in unspecified species. Reasons for suspecting sexual abuse were: the type of injury; behaviour of the owner; statements from witnesses; and admission by the perpetrator. Types of injury included vaginal and anorectal penetrative (penile and non-penile) injury, perianal damage, and trauma to the genitals. Some injuries (such as castration) were extreme, and some were fatal. In contrast, other cases revealed no obvious damage. The type and severity of injuries were similar to those described in texts on child abuse and human forensic pathology.**

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*Journal of Small Animal Practice* (2001)  
42, 333-337

## INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of papers describing a study of physical abuse in dogs and cats – that is, abuse by deliberate physical injury (so-called non-accidental injury [NAI] or 'battered pets' – by analogy with the well documented 'battered-child syndrome' [Kempe and others 1962]). The study was based on the experiences of a sample of small animal practitioners in the UK. The first paper published in this series addressed the features that raised suspicion, or allowed recognition, of such abuse (Munro and Thrusfield 2001a), while the second detailed the injuries involved (Munro and Thrusfield 2001b).

The study focused primarily on physical abuse (NAI), but also identified cases of a sexual nature. Vermeulen and Odendaal (1993) included one aspect of sexual abuse, 'bestiality', as a form of physical abuse (NAI) in their proposed typology of companion animal abuse (without documenting details of cases), but, conventionally, cases of sexual abuse are classified separately from NAI (Meadow 1997, Munro and Thrusfield 2001a). However, it was considered desirable to present a detailed account of sexual abuse cases in

this series, albeit under the general series heading 'battered pets', because, to the best of the authors' knowledge, it is the first published report of such cases, and therefore complements the study in what is probably its most sensitive area.

## Terminology

Further clarification of the term 'sexual abuse', and other associated terms, with regard to sexual activity between humans and animals, is essential. The definition of the commonly used term 'bestiality' has varied over the centuries, and in different parts of the world (Beirne 1997). Its modern definition, and that of its less well-known, etymologically anodyne synonym, 'zoophilia' (Greek: ζῶο = animal, -φιλία = affection), is 'sexual activity between a person and an animal' (Hanks 1986). However, if 'bestiality' is mentioned in the literature, it is usually confined to one or two lines. Thus, Gee and Watson (1991), in their text on sexual offences, summarily dismiss it as 'sexual intercourse with animals, a form of sexual perversion obviously more likely to be encountered in the country' (implying that it is generally confined to livestock), and Tannahill (1989), in her extensive study of sex in history, gives it no more than a cursory mention. Moreover, neither expression reflects the wide spectrum of sexually motivated acts that may be involved, nor do they draw attention to any actual physical injury that may be caused – a fact appreciated by Beirne (1997), who points out that the range of animals used in sexual activity is wide, as is the spectrum of injury.

In humans, sexual abuse (using this term to include not only the sexual abuse of children but also sexual offences against adults of both sexes) may involve the anorectal region as well as the genitalia of both sexes. The injuries may vary from none (as is commonly noted in child sexual abuse [Hobbs and others 1999a]) to extreme, where violent acts cause death (Gee 1985). Such detail has been lacking in the animal abuse field until now, and in this study, all the cases, with only two

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exceptions, were reported to involve physical injury, some of which was extreme.

With regard to the definition of activities that appear similar to those inflicted on people, but involve the use of animals, the term 'animal sexual abuse' (following the contemporary practice of using nouns as adjectives, which is also consistent with the accepted term 'child sexual abuse') is therefore more precise and encompassing than either bestiality or zoophilia. Beirne (1997) offers an alternative term, 'interspecies sexual assault', but this is not favoured by the authors because it could be interpreted to imply improbable activities (the sexual abuse of one animal species by another).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Sampling of veterinarians

An anonymous questionnaire, soliciting details of veterinarians' perceptions and experience of NAI, was distributed to a sample of 1000 veterinarians, randomly selected from a list of members of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) resident in the UK. The four sections of the questionnaire recorded information on: (1) acknowledgement and recognition of NAI; (2) individual cases (species, breed, age, gender, reasons for suspicion/recognition, nature of injuries and outcome for the animal); (3) experience of putative characteristic features (for example, history inconsistent with injury); and (4) any salient comments. Data were stored on a custom-built database using Access 97 (Microsoft, Redmond, WA). Full details of the sampling procedure are presented in the first paper in this series (Munro and Thrusfield 2001a).

### Definition of cases of sexual abuse

Cases were defined as involving sexual abuse if they:

- had been explicitly identified as such by respondents;
- or
- displayed characteristics that would

classify them as sexual abuse cases in the human literature (as outlined in the Introduction), but without explicit identification by respondents.

## RESULTS

Questionnaires were returned by 404 respondents, and detailed abuse in 243 dogs, 182 cats, three horses, two rabbits, one hamster, two 'dogs and cats' and 15 unspecified species. These included 21 cases of sexual abuse in dogs (14 females and seven males), and five cases in cats (three females, one male and one of unspecified gender) (Table 1). In addition, two respondents reported injuries of a sexual nature (cases 27 and 28) without recording either the species or gender (although one – case 27 – was obviously female, because the injuries were unexplained vaginal injuries). Two respondents reported two cases each. All others reported a single case.

Table 1 documents fully the case reports submitted by the respondents. Cases are grouped (as far as possible) according to the main sites and type of injury. For example, cases 1 to 5 list known, or suspected, penile penetrative abuse, involving the vagina in dogs, and cases 6 to 13 report various general vulval, vaginal and uterine injuries in dogs.

In six cases (cases 1 to 5 and case 16), the nature of the injuries, and related circumstances, allowed respondents to identify 'sexual abuse' specifically (for example, case 2: 'Owner claimed dog sexually abused by lodger, who pled guilty . . .'). In others, respondents had categorised the abuse as physical, but they were subsequently reclassified by the authors as sexual abuse cases because they involved injury to the genitalia or ano-rectal areas (for example, case 25, in which four equidistant radial splits were present in the anus).

Careful consideration was given to the inclusion of cases 5 and 11. Although there was no direct physical evidence in case 5, the fact that the owner specifically sought

examination on the grounds that she suspected sexual abuse, merited documentation. In case 11, the respondent had reported multiple internal haemorrhages around the uterus and within the abdominal wall, but the vulval injury justified its inclusion.

### Reasons for suspicion

The reasons for suspecting sexual abuse varied, encompassing one or more of the following:

- the type of injury;
- the behaviour of the owner;
- statements from witnesses;
- admission by the perpetrator.

Thus, types of injury included 'Piece of broom handle recovered from distal vagina . . .' (case 12); behaviour of the owner was recorded in one case (case 25) as ' . . . the owner was angry on questioning'; a witness statement was 'Dog had been seen being sexually abused' (case 16); and a perpetrator ' . . . admitted abuse' (case 13).

### Cases in dogs

The female dogs included five cases (cases 1 to 5) of known or suspected penile penetrative (vaginal) abuse (three with vaginal injuries), two reports of uterine/vaginal/vulval injury of unexplained origin (cases 6 and 11), six cases involving insertion of a foreign body into the vagina (cases 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 13) and one case of insertion of a foreign body into the rectum (case 14). One dog (case 7) with a vaginal foreign body (a knife) died, as did the dog (case 14) with the rectal foreign body (a broomstick).

Cases in male dogs included three with a ligature applied to the external genitalia (cases 17, 18 and 19), two with anal injuries (cases 15 and 16), one (case 20) with severe wounds to the external genitalia (castration) and one with a penetrating wound to the area around the rectum (case 21).

### Cases in cats

Two cats (one female and one of unspecified gender) had penetrating wounds in

**Table 1. Individual cases of known and suspected sexual abuse in dogs and cats**

Case	Species	Breed	Age	Gender	Details reported by respondent	Outcome
1	Dog	Border collie	>2 years	F	Vaginal injuries present. Wife saw husband having sex with dog	Survived
2	Dog	Crossbreed	>2 years	FN	Owner claimed dog sexually abused by lodger, who pled guilty and asked for other offences to be taken into account. Respondent reported no injuries noted	Survived
3	Dog	Dalmatian	NR	F	Sudden onset bleeding from vulva. Trauma to vagina. Dog possibly 'raped' by human	Survived
4	Dog	Cocker spaniel	NR	F	Recurrent refractory vaginitis. In-depth investigation undertaken, which suggested the cause was 'human interference'	Survived
5	Dog	Dalmatian	NR	F	Owner requested examination of bitch because she suspected that her husband had 'interfered' with dog. Bitch in season, showing pro-oestral bleeding, and externally normal. No internal examination made and no samples taken	Survived
6	Dog	Crossbreed	NR	F	Gross vaginal injuries caused suspicion	Survived
7	Dog	Crossbreed	>2 years	F	Haemorrhage from vulva. Postmortem examination revealed knife wound deep in vagina. Blood vessels in abdomen had been severed	Died
8	Dog	Crossbreed	>2 years	F	Sharp point felt on abdominal palpation was sharp end of a knitting needle, the other end of which was vaginal in location. The 12 inch long needle had penetrated uterine/cervical wall	Survived
9	Dog	Staffordshire bull terrier	NR	F	Tear in uterus just rostral to the cervix, with no 'natural' explanation for injury. Track of scarring through cervix, with puncture just anterior, through uterus. Young girl in household suspected of causing injury	Survived
10	Dog	Crossbreed	7 months to 2 years	F	Intracervical/vaginal foreign body (candle) found during routine ovariohysterectomy of stray dog	Survived
11	Dog	Staffordshire bull terrier	>2 years	F	Multiple haemorrhages around vulva, and internally (around uterus and within abdominal wall)	Survived
12	Dog	Collie	>2 years	F	Piece of broom handle recovered from distal vagina. Secondary infection of vaginal canal	Survived
13	Dog	English bull terrier	7 months to 2 years	F	Laparotomy for abdominal pain/suspected peritonitis. Rostral vagina punctured by piece of stick, a fragment of which still present at puncture site. Investigation undertaken by animal welfare charity and male family member then admitted abuse	Survived
14	Dog	Lurcher	7 months to 2 years	F	Broomstick inserted into rectum up to level of liver	Died
15	Dog	Yorkshire terrier	>2 years	M	Mucosa all around anus damaged and almost necrotic. No obvious explanation for lesion	Survived
16	Dog	Crossbreed	>2 years	M	Dog been seen being sexually abused. Anal ring dilated and both ears chronically thickened. Respondent had not at first believed the abuse, but several people were aware that it was occurring and had reported a man to the police	Survived
17	Dog	Crossbreed	>2 years	M	Cord ligature tied round base of penis	Survived
18	Dog	Collie	>2 years	M	Elastic band had been placed around base of dog's scrotum, which was swollen and necrotic. Single episode but more suspected when owner interviewed. Perpetrated by teenage sons	Survived
19	Dog	Labrador retriever	7 months to 2 years	M	Severe, necrotising swelling of scrotum and testes, with evidence of constriction high on scrotum, consistent with a broad ligature which had been removed. Foster child in household later admitted having applied a rubber band to scrotum	Survived
20	Dog	Red setter	7 months to 2 years	M	The dog was found alone, haemorrhaging profusely, and had been castrated with a very sharp implement, leaving an open wound. Dog was not reclaimed	Survived
21	Dog	Collie cross	>2 years	M	Large, penetrating pararectal wound. Respondent reported that appearance of injury, and owner, had caused suspicion	Survived
22	Cat	NR	NR	NR	Deep incised wound in rectum and perineum. Respondent noted that it was difficult to see how this could have been accidental	Survived
23	Cat	Domestic shorthaired	7 months to 2 years	FN	Deep single penetrating wound, thought to be stab wound, caused by a 'large sharp instrument', in perivulval and perianal area. Respondent considered wound 'far too clean and neat to be an animal tooth/claw wound'	Survived
24	Cat	Domestic shorthaired	7 months to 2 years	F	Foreign object, bloody and infected, had been inserted into the vagina. Thought to be tampon. Considered unlikely to have occurred accidentally	Survived
25	Cat	Domestic shorthaired	7 months to 2 years	FN	Four equidistant radial splits* – consistent with the insertion of large object – present in anus. Respondent considered lesion inexplicable, and noted owner angry on questioning	Survived
26	Cat	Domestic shorthaired	<12 weeks	M	Traumatised genitalia. Kitten soaking wet, with a strong, sweet smell, resembling after-shave lotion or shampoo. Teenage perpetrator also violent to his mother†	Died
27	NR	NR	NR	NR	Unexplained vaginal injuries	NR
28	NR	NR	NR	NR	Perianal wounds, consistent with stabbing. Described by respondent as 'oddy sited'	NR

NR Not recorded, M Male, F Female, N Neutered

\*Diagram supplied by respondent (not reproduced in this paper)

†Perpetrator also physically abused other animals (cases included in Munro and Thrusfield 2000b)

the rectal and vulval areas (cases 22 and 23). One female cat had an anal injury (case 25), and another had a vaginal foreign body (case 24). The sole recorded male, a young kitten, had suffered trauma to the external genitalia (case 26). This kitten's injuries were fatal.

### Cases in unspecified species

One respondent recorded unexplained vaginal injuries and another recorded penetrating perianal wounds, described as 'oddly sited' (cases 27 and 28, respectively.)

## DISCUSSION

The sexual abuse of animals is not a subject that, even today, is frankly and openly discussed, although it has been documented, and usually condemned, for centuries (Beirne 1997). The cases documented in this paper clearly demonstrate that sexual abuse of animals does occur, and that physical injury may result, some of which may be very severe.

It is the very fact that the abuse involves either the sexual organs, or the anus and rectum, that classifies the abuse as sexual in nature. In this unexplored veterinary field, much benefit is gained from the extensive experience accumulated by the medical profession on the subjects of child sexual abuse and sexual offences against adults.

Hobbs and others (1999a) point out that 'child sexual abuse may present in many ways', and that 'Normality on examination is common even if the child has been abused.' In the current study, cases 2 and 5 displayed no obvious injury. Thus, it can be speculated that, as with children, cases may occur in animals that currently are difficult to recognise, with injuries being minimal or absent.

However, Hobbs and others (1999b) also note that violence does occur in some cases of child sexual abuse, and the consequences may be fatal. Sexual offences against adults may be similarly severe (Gee 1985). Such severity is clearly demonstrated in cases 7 (where a knife wound was

found deep in the vagina) and 14 (where a broomstick, inserted in the rectum, reached the liver). Common sense, too, indicates that the degree of damage to the female genitalia following penetration, penile or otherwise (for example, cases 1 and 24), is dependent, to some degree, on the size of the animal.

Hobbs and others (1999a) note 'deliberately sadistic acts', such as lacerations to the dorsum of the penis, and cuts to the vulva or perianal area of children. The current study includes four cases involving penetrating wounds in the area of the vulva and rectum (cases 21, 22, 23 and 28). Intravaginal implements used in this case series include a candle (case 10), a knitting needle (case 8), a fragment of broom handle (case 12), a piece of stick (case 13) and (possibly) a tampon (case 24).

The clinical findings relating to anal sexual abuse in children are well documented (Bamford and Roberts 1997a,b, Hobbs and others 1999a) and include anal fissuring and anal dilatation. Similar findings are also present in the current case series: a cat with a split anus (case 25), a small dog with unexplained damage to the anal mucosa (case 15) and a dog with a dilated anal ring (case 16). Fissuring can occur for other reasons (notably constipation), too. Some authors (for example, Hobbs and others 1999a) suggest that differentiation of causes may be possible in children (for example, multiple fissures, or deep fissures, extending on to the perianal skin, in the absence of a history of constipation, identified in some child abuse cases). However, it may be unwise to extrapolate specific features identified in cases of child abuse to small animals, where there currently is a paucity of recorded cases.

Textbooks on veterinary obstetrics and gynaecology do not include sexual abuse in the differential diagnosis of vaginal lesions. Given that some respondents in the current survey have reported vaginal injuries caused by sexual abuse (cases 1, 3 and 4), that another respondent reported suspicious 'gross vaginal injuries' (case 6), and

yet another listed unexplained vaginal injuries (case 27), it seems advisable to add possible sexual abuse, in appropriate circumstances, to the list of differential diagnoses for vaginal lesions. It *must* be emphasised that – as with NAI – the *circumstances* of the suspected offence must be carefully considered (Munro and Thrusfield 2001a,b).

It is possible that some might at first consider the application of ligatures to the penis or scrotum (cases 17 to 19) as likely to be a result of an ignorant childish prank. However, Hobbs and others (1999a), in their list of more common genital injuries found in abused boys, include a circumferential mark due to a penile ligature. They also note that 'It is apparent that doctors have been slow to acknowledge genital injury, and even now fail to name the injury; for example a ligature around the base of the penis may be explained away as punishment for bed-wetting, or aggression on behalf of the abuser.' Although veterinarians are not generally involved with the wider issues of abuse in families, the question has to be asked as to why the idea of applying a ligature to these animals occurred to the perpetrator in the first place.

The range of injuries in abused animals reported here mirrors, by and large, the spectrum identified in human victims. However, some types of animal sexual abuse (for example, the use of male animals as active sexual 'partners' of women) clearly would not be reported in the current study, although they are known to occur (Adams 1998).

The cases reported are not an accurate measure of the incidence of animal sexual abuse in the UK, because the main aim of the study was to obtain only a basic measure of the extent of abuse in terms of the proportion of veterinary practices that have experienced it (Munro and Thrusfield 2001a). However, the cases do comprise 6 per cent of the 448 cases listed by the 404 veterinarians who completed randomly distributed questionnaires. This suggests that the problem is not trivial.

Beirne (1997), in an essay entitled 'Rethinking bestiality', describes the 'curious silence' that surrounds the sexual abuse of animals. The same author points out that although 'all known societies have likely applied some form of censure to human-animal sexual relations', the abuse has never been censured on the grounds of the harm that it inflicts on animals. It is hoped that this paper will end the silence by stimulating open and frank discussion of the subject.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors thank the RSPCA for financial support for the study, the Scottish SPCA for support and interest, and the BSAVA for the provision of members' address labels. Special thanks are also due to Dave Stone and Rhona Muirhead of the

University of Edinburgh for their invaluable help with the study's database. Finally, the authors are extremely grateful to the veterinarians who completed and returned questionnaires.

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