



# A helping HAND

By Anna Dunlop

Where there's animal abuse, research shows there's often human abuse, too.

What role do veterinarians have in addressing suspected family violence – and how should they go about it?

**V**eterinarians' pivotal role in the fight against animal abuse is well known, but awareness is growing that the profession can also help to address human abuse. According to Catherine Rice, Principal Lecturer at Otago Polytechnic's veterinary nursing programme, it's because the two are intrinsically linked.

"Multiple international studies have shown strong links between animal abuse and family violence," she says. "Given that veterinarians interact with both pets and their owners, they're in a unique position to recognise the signs of both," she adds.

New Zealand has the highest rate of family violence among developed countries in the OECD, with research suggesting that one in three New Zealand women experiences intimate





partner violence in their lifetime. Consider this alongside the fact that New Zealand also has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world, and the connection is clear.

Research has also shown that a substantial number of women delay leaving abusive relationships – or don't leave at all – out of fear for their pets' safety. In fact, a report released by Women's Refuge in 2018, entitled *Pet Abuse as Part of Intimate Partner Violence* (Jury et al., 2018), put that number at 53%. Threats to animals are influential in abusers' coercive control of their partners; in the same report, 45% of participants had experienced partners threatening to harm, kill or get rid of animals for the purpose of coercing them to do something.

Catherine recently completed a master's research project surveying veterinarians' awareness of and actions taken in relation to animal abuse and

family violence. She's since used it to develop workshops on the topic for the veterinary profession.

"Fortunately, awareness isn't the problem," she says. "Most veterinarians and veterinary nurses know of the link, and many have an idea of what they should do if they suspect family violence. However, they're often concerned about the potential repercussions of broaching the topic with clients.

"Not only do they not want to cause offence, but they're worried about the consequences for the victims, and for their own and their colleagues' personal safety – as well as the rules in relation to privacy and professional boundaries. How do you approach a conversation like that? What do you say? Those are the biggest barriers."

In 2013 VCNZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries published *Guidance for Veterinarians: Dealing with cases*

Above: Catherine Rice has developed workshops aimed at building veterinarians' confidence in addressing suspected family violence

*of suspected or actual animal abuse and family violence*, which provided detailed information on identifying and responding to signs of family violence. However, while it's an excellent resource it doesn't cover *how* to have difficult conversations with clients – a topic that Catherine covers in depth in her workshops.

"I worked with Shine [Safer Homes in New Zealand Everyday] in Auckland to formulate an appropriate response," she says. "It's not about telling the victim what to do or judging them for bad decisions, it's about increasing their autonomy and power and offering non-judgmental, practical help."

She says it's also about establishing a community network of people who can help, and for this reason she invites



staff from local SPCAs and animal shelters to her workshops. “It’s much easier for veterinarians to help clients if they can point them to organisations that can help.”

One of these organisations is Pet Refuge, New Zealand’s first and only pet shelter with the purpose of helping pets and families leave abusive homes. Located in an undisclosed area of Auckland, it provides pets with temporary housing and care for up to four months – and longer if needed. The shelter covers the costs of pet transport (they come from all over the country) as well as food, medication, veterinary procedures, flea and worm treatments, desexing, enrichment and any behavioural therapy needed to help the animals recover from their trauma. Referrals come from organisations such as Women’s Refuge, Shine and New Zealand Police, as well as social workers and, more recently, hospital emergency departments. Self-referrals are also becoming more common.

“We opened our doors in July 2021, and immediately realised the need was significant,” says Julie Chapman, who founded the shelter. “For the past 15 months we’ve been at capacity, so we’ve partnered with some trusted external

## HOW CAN VETERINARIANS HELP?

- ▷ Raise awareness of Pet Refuge by displaying its flyers and posters in your clinic and/or giving them to people you think may need help. “Simply handing someone a flyer or leaflet is a subtle way of giving them information they might need,” says Emma. “We have ours on display at the reception desk, so people can just take one if they need it.” ([www.petrefuge.org.nz](http://www.petrefuge.org.nz)).
- ▷ Distribute VCNZ’s guidance in your clinic. Pin it to a noticeboard and/or put it on social media ([vetcouncil.org.nz/Web/Web/1.Support-and-Information/Vets/Standards\\_and\\_Guidance.aspx](http://vetcouncil.org.nz/Web/Web/1.Support-and-Information/Vets/Standards_and_Guidance.aspx)).
- ▷ Host a workshop for your practice. Contact Catherine on 021 178 5853 or email [catherine.rice@op.ac.nz](mailto:catherine.rice@op.ac.nz).
- ▷ Increase colleagues’ and employees’ knowledge of the connections between animal abuse and family violence by initiating discussions on the issue.
- ▷ Establish policies and protocols to guide veterinarians and other staff who suspect family violence. “Try to create a compassionate environment so that people feel safe confiding in you and your team,” says Emma.
- ▷ Make connections with local kennels and catteries, and find out if they’re willing to house pets in need temporarily.
- ▷ Organise a clinic fundraiser to raise money for Pet Refuge.

Left: Julie with one of the cats housed at Pet Refuge. Right: veterinary students discuss family violence during a workshop

boarding kennels and catteries to ensure we can keep saying yes to helping people. Our goal is to build a second shelter, also in Auckland, in the next few years, that will more than double our capacity.”

To date, Pet Refuge has helped 270 pets and their families to escape violence. Of those, around 225 have been reunited with their owners; most of the others are still boarding at the kennels, and a few have needed to be rehomed. While most are cats and dogs, the shelter is set up to take all pets, and has looked after five horses (larger farm animals are housed on supporting farms), numerous birds and even two water dragons.

“The model works well,” says Julie. “We understand that those leaving violent situations often find it difficult to get rental accommodation that allows pets. That’s why we offer support for up to four months.”

Emma Bevan, a veterinarian at Millwater Veterinary Hospital in Auckland, visits the shelter once a week to check newly arrived animals, whose numbers can range from five to 20. They’re all given a full health screen, and Emma checks whether they’re chipped and if their vaccinations are up to date. “Pet Refuge is committed to providing the best care possible for each animal, and that includes allowing me to take animals to our clinic for work-ups and dental and other investigations if I think



it’s necessary. I’m incredibly lucky and proud to work with Pet Refuge,” she continues. “Whether it’s transporting animals from every corner of the country or taking calls every hour of the day and night, they go above and beyond to help people and pets escape terrible situations. We need more like them.” <sup>©</sup>

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