

“Animal Abuse and Unlawful Killing. Forensic Veterinary Pathology”

by **Ranald Munro and Helen MC Munro**

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Although veterinary surgeons have long been involved in legal cases, it is only in the past five years that books specifically about forensic veterinary medicine have appeared. This one by Dr Ranald and Mrs Helen Munro, interestingly the second husband and wife team to author such a book, follows hot on the heels of Sinclair, Merck and Lockwood (2006), Cooper and Cooper (2007), and Merck (2007).

The title of the Munros' book provides a clear, unambiguous, indication of the thrust of this volume: it is concerned with the “unlawful killing” of animals and how veterinary science, especially pathology, can be used to investigate such activities. The Munros are in a very strong position to have produced such a text. Ranald Munro was the first British veterinary surgeon to obtain a Diploma in Forensic Medicine and holds the position of Professor of Forensic Veterinary Pathology at the Royal Veterinary College, London. Helen Munro has pioneered studies on animal abuse. Both have published and lectured widely.

The focus in this book is on the cruelty that is inflicted on animals and such an emphasis is immediately apparent to the reader, as is the authors' repugnance at such actions and their clear determination that these practices should be subject to appropriate action under criminal law. The opening pages, Acknowledgements and Authors' Notes (the two authors have written their own, separately) are interleaved with reproduced plates of William Hogarth's “The Four Stages of Cruelty”. These depictions are a stark reminder that even 300 hundred years ago some observers linked abuse of animals with violence to humans.

There are 15 chapters in this book. Chapter 1 introduces the subject. It is very short (just over one page) and carries only one reference, to an article in the “Daily Telegraph”. The reader, especially if new to the subject, is likely to be left asking for more – and there are nearly 20cm of blank space on the page in which this might have been provided. Chapter 2 explains the fundamentals of animal abuse – classification and categories – and introduces the concept of “non-accidental injury (NAI)”. Chapter 3 discusses NAI in considerable detail while Chapter 4 explains the practicalities of forensic

examination and report writing. In Chapter 5, neglect is considered and is well-illustrated with coloured pictures and radiographs. Chapters 6-12 describe specific types of insult – wounds, thermal injuries, firearms injuries, asphyxia and drowning, injuries associated with physical agents, traps and snares, and bite injuries. All are excellently supplemented with clear photographs and some helpful line-drawings.

In Chapter 13 the difficult question of estimation of time since death is explained; the emphasis is on mammals. Chapter 14 devotes two pages of text and 19 references to a valuable analysis of the features that can be associated with the sexual abuse of animals. The concluding section of the book, Chapter 15 is entitled Poisoning, and provides a very succinct but helpful account of the various toxicants that may affect animals, the effects they are likely to have and the diagnostic samples that need to be taken from such cases.

The Index is reasonably comprehensive but there are surprising omissions – for example, health and safety, risk assessment and zoonoses (see below).

The references are disappointing and tantalising selective. It is surprising, for example, that none of the other recently published books on veterinary forensics is mentioned, especially those emphasising animal abuse. As was mentioned earlier, ample blank space remains in the book for such citations and, indeed, for other information that might be of interest or assistance to the reader.

The authors discuss (cited) literature that makes a link between animal and human abuse but do not appear to have included papers that question, rightly or wrongly, this association. There is no doubt that incidents of animal and child abuse demand attention or, preferably, prevention. However, this requires evidence or information upon which the appropriate authorities can act. When maltreatment is suspected in animals presented for treatment, it is the veterinary surgeon (veterinarian) that is most likely to have to decide what action to take. Munro and Munro advise that the vet's primary duty is to the welfare of the animal concerned (no reference provided) and cite authorities that put the case for the

value of veterinary recognition of non-accidental injury, when disclosed to enforcing agencies. However, a full discussion of the factors that a veterinary surgeon may need to consider is disappointingly lacking in this book, not least the issue of the veterinarian's prima facie duty of client confidentiality and the exceptions to this laid down in the RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct. There is brief mention elsewhere in the book of RCVS guidance on non-accidental injury as a differential diagnosis but other relevant advice from the College is omitted. There also appears to be no reminder that the RCVS invites a concerned member to discuss with it a potential abuse case before making a final decision as to whether to report it.

Veterinary surgeons practising in the UK are under no direct statutory obligation (coupled with an indemnity in respect of client confidentiality) to report abuse, as is the case in some States in the USA, so they have to make difficult decisions. It would have been helpful to tease out the obligations, ethical issues, motives and wider consequences, including the impact on the parties involved, in order to enable veterinary surgeons faced with indications of non-accidental injuries in a patient, child abuse or other violence to make sound judgments in respect of reporting them. Addressing these issues, especially in borderline situations, would have complemented the wealth of forensic pathology provided in the book.

This book is subtitled "Forensic Veterinary Pathology" and the senior author's experience in this field is very apparent from both the text and the images. However, it is important to remember that investigation of allegations of animal abuse or unlawful killing is only one aspect of the discipline: forensic veterinary pathologists are involved in many other activities, some relating to naturally occurring diseases, and others to insurance claims or allegations of malpractice. There is it seems an increasing tendency for the term "veterinary forensics" to be equated with cruelty investigation. This is unfortunate. It is most important that this growing discipline is not whittled down to a very narrow and specialised area of study.

It is surprising, bearing in mind the authors' clear concern for the wellbeing of humans, as well as for that of animals that little is said about the health hazards that can be presented by forensic work, ranging from slipping accidents to zoonoses. Likewise, legal considerations are not covered, despite the importance to pathologists of knowing which permits or authority are needed to transport diagnostic specimens.

To conclude, although somewhat limited in its scope and disappointing in some respects, this is a useful addition to the forensic literature. It should be available to any veterinary surgeon who is involved in legal cases where cruelty or unlawful killing is alleged.

John E Cooper

Department of Veterinary Medicine, University of Cambridge, Cambridge (UK).

Margaret E Cooper

Wildlife Health Services International, Cambridge (UK).

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