

DOGFIGHTING FAQ FOR VETERINARIANS

What is my legal responsibility to report suspected dogfighting?

The American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association both recognize the importance of responding to suspicions of client involvement in animal cruelty. Several states specifically mandate that veterinarians report suspicions of animal fighting, and others mandate reporting of suspicions of general animal cruelty. Roughly half of the states provide immunity for good faith reporting of suspected abuse. Check with your state VMA for the current status of such regulations in your area. Even without a legal mandate to report, veterinarians who knowingly assist clients that are suspected of dogfighting activity may be subject to criminal charges as accessories if they fail to report.

What is considered grounds for such suspicion?

As with other forms of animal abuse, the most significant indicator that an animal's condition may be the result of dogfighting is that its injuries are inconsistent with the account provided by the owner, or that the account given by the owner changes in the course of the examination. Some warning signs that you may be dealing with a dogfighting client:

- Fighting dogs usually show signs of multiple puncture wounds in various stages of healing—suggesting several separate events. These wounds are often most common on the face, chest, and forelimbs. The front legs may show bite marks encircling the leg, or degloving injuries. Radiographs may reveal recent as well as healed fractures. All wounds should be photographed at mid-range (showing position on the body) and in close-up. Wounds encircling the legs should be photographed in their entirety.
- The most common explanations dogfighters give for injuries to their dogs are that the wounds are the result of a “yard accident” in which the dog got into a single fight with another dog, or that the injuries were the result of an attack by a wild boar during a pig hunt. Make note of observations that would be inconsistent with such accounts, e.g., evidence of multiple stages of healing, unusual location of injuries, wounds inconsistent with laceration and slashing injuries from tusks of a boar, etc.
- Fighting dogs may have had ears and/or tails cropped by the owner or someone else who did not use proper tools and procedures. Make note of croppings and dockings that are irregular, infected, or otherwise suspicious. Dogs may also have had teeth filed down or extracted. This is sometimes done to females to prevent injuries to males during breeding, or to dogs used as bait animals to minimize injuries to fighting dogs during training.

- Fighting dogs may have abrasions or even embedded collars or chains as a result of prolonged chaining to keep them from having access to other fighting animals on the property.
- Dogfighters may request drugs or medical supplies for animals that have not been brought to the clinic, potentially for use in treating other fighting animals.
- Fighters may offer cash payment or arrange for third party payment so there is less of a paper trail linking them to the care provided.

How should I make a report of suspected dogfighting?

It is not your role to investigate possible illegal activity or to confront the suspect. Report your suspicions to law enforcement or the animal control agency with jurisdiction to handle these types of crimes. If you are concerned for the immediate safety of yourself, your staff, or others, dial 911 while the animal is separated from the owner for examination and request immediate assistance.

Remember that everything you do, write, and say is likely to be disclosed to law enforcement authorities and to the accused (who may be your client). If you are called to testify under oath or to give a statement, you may be asked about anything you have documented. Be objective, honest, and thorough.

If possible have another veterinarian (or witness) document their observations and assessments. Document what the client tells you when explaining the animal's condition. Document to whom you reported and when. Although agencies may accept anonymous calls, it is likely that your testimony will be essential to any legal action that might be taken against a dogfighting suspect and you should not expect to remain anonymous.

The best time to discuss the reporting of possible cases of animal cruelty with your staff is before it becomes necessary. You should have a standard operating procedure in place for such events that you have reviewed with all staff who may encounter evidence of cruelty.

I have been asked to assist law enforcement in a dogfight raid/rescue. What will be my responsibility?

If you are asked to assist police or humane law enforcement in an investigation of dogfighting, you may have several responsibilities. A primary role may be to assist in the assessment and emergency treatment of animals rescued from the scene. In addition to a general health check, with blood work and fecal examination, you should carefully document and photograph any injuries and scars, and make a notation of such injuries on the scar chart included in this toolkit. All animals should be scanned for microchips and examined for tattoos, particularly animals that might have been stolen to be used as bait dogs. Law enforcement may also request collection of samples that can be used to screen for anabolic steroids, stimulants, and other drugs commonly used in fighting dogs (see Appendix A: **Veterinary Supplies and Drugs Commonly Used in Dogfighting**). You may also be asked to perform a necropsy on any deceased dogs or to examine remains that may have been buried or otherwise disposed of at the scene.

If you are required to house injured dogs during their recovery, special precautions should be taken for security and to insure that the dogs do not have access to other animals (see **FAQ for Animal Shelters**).

Are fighting dogs difficult or dangerous to examine or treat?

Most veterinarians who have been involved in the care and treatment of fighting dogs comment on the ease with which they can be handled. Most fighting dogs have been selected for a low level of aggression to people, since they must tolerate the presence of handlers and referees even under the harsh conditions of the fighting pit. They often have a high pain tolerance, and thus can be easier to handle when injured. However, many fighting dogs have a low threshold for aggression to other dogs, and should be kept isolated from any other animals.

What special protocols should be followed upon intake of dogs seized in connection with dogfighting?

Veterinarians caring for fighting dogs have two responsibilities. They must deal with the animals' medical needs and must also gather information that may become evidence in a criminal proceeding. The extent of care that can be rendered will be affected by the number of animals seized and available staff and other resources.

A separate scar/wound chart should be completed for each dog and photographs of all scars/wounds should be taken. Attention should be given to dental condition, since some fighting dogs may have teeth filed or extracted. A buccal swab should be taken of each examined dog. This can prove useful in using DNA evidence in linking together animals seized from various locations.

There should be full blood work done on all adult animals (6 mos and older) regardless of health status determination, and full blood work on all sick/thin animals regardless of age, unless exam findings determine blood work unnecessary. Recommended tests to run include: complete blood count (CBC); complete blood chemistries including thyroid screening; Heartworm antigen; urinalysis; fecal tests for ova and parasites using zinc sulfate; Giardia Elisa; Parvo Canine Antigen, and Babesia.

Basic treatments will include ectoparasite treatment, deworming, wound treatment, antibiotics, eye medications, SQ fluids, ear cleaning and treatment, shaving of matted fur and/or bathing if needed for medical reasons. Dogs that are to be held for any length of time should receive preventive vaccinations for distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parainfluenza, and parvovirus to boost their immune system. They may be unvaccinated or may have been vaccinated incorrectly or with improper or expired vaccines.

The initial determination to treat or euthanize will be based on veterinary assessment. For any circumstances where the decision is unclear, the final decision will be made by the acting Medical Veterinarian in Charge associated with the investigation or rescue. Euthanasia can only be performed by the appropriate person as per the State Veterinary Practice Act. All euthanized animals, dead animals on-scene, or animals that later die should be held for necropsy.

What kind of injuries or illnesses should I expect to see in fighting dogs?

Dogs that have been recently fought may have multiple puncture wounds, crushing injuries, and fractured bones. Recently fought dogs may show elevated CPK as a result of the extreme exercise and stress. They may also suffer from blood loss, dehydration, and shock. Fighting dogs have been reported to have a high incidence of Babesia (*B. gibsoni* and *B. canis*). They are highly susceptible to parvovirus as well. Veterinary reports from examination of many

fighting dogs also indicate many parasites are common, including heartworms, tapeworms, hookworms, roundworms, tapeworms, coccidia, giardia, and demodectic mange. In addition, these dogs may have acral lick granulomas, pyodermas, pressure sores, and ACL ruptures. The examination should include full-body radiographs, which may also reveal embedded bullets. Necropsy of deceased animals may reveal widespread internal injuries, penetrating wounds (including to the skull), deep scoring of leg bones, and other indications of severe fight wounds. Entomological evidence may help determine time since death or age of injuries in a living animal. All of these conditions should be carefully recorded with the expectation that they may become significant evidence.

What will be my role in court?

Veterinarians usually play two roles in the prosecution of a dogfighting case. As material witnesses, they report on what they saw, heard, smelled, and touched in the course of their work on the scene or with the animals. They will report on any tests that were run and other clinical findings. They may also serve as expert witnesses, offering informed scientific opinions as to the plausibility of alternative explanations of the animals' injuries and opinion on the degree of pain and suffering to which the animals were subjected. It is usually the attending veterinarian who plays the primary role of communicating to the judge or jury the story of an animal that may have suffered or died.

Should I expect to be paid for my work on such cases?

Although many veterinarians donate their services in responding to animal cruelty cases, it is reasonable to expect compensation for the time you spend working on such cases or testifying in court, just like any other medical expert. Usually a reasonable compensation is what it would cost to have a relief veterinarian cover your duties while you are away from your practice. Costs associated with care, treatment, and housing of animals should be worked out in advance with the law enforcement or animal care and control agency handling the case. Reimbursements from the defendant for care and treatment of animals may be ordered by the court as restitution upon conviction. Often the community is generous in making donations to the local humane society, animal control agency, or veterinary clinic to specifically cover expenses associated with a cruelty case.

Should I be concerned for the safety of myself and my staff if I am involved in assisting in the prosecution of dogfighters?

Dogfighting is a violent criminal enterprise, but incidents of harassment or threats against veterinarians involved in these cases are very rare. Any inappropriate communication or contact from the suspect, his family, or associates should be reported to the prosecutor and/or police.

Resources

- Melinda D. Merck. 2007. *Veterinary Forensics: Animal Cruelty Investigations*. Ames, Iowa: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lila Miller and Stephen Zawistowski (Editors). 2004. *Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff*. Ames, Iowa: Blackwell Publishing.
- Leslie Sinclair, Melinda D. Merck and Randall Lockwood. 2006. *Forensic Investigation of Animal Cruelty: A Guide for Veterinary and Law Enforcement Professionals*. Washington, D.C.: Humane Society Press.