

Multiple **Victims**: Domestic Violence & Animal Abuse

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The last edition of the DVRC *Quarterly* included a feature called 'Figuring Violence - DV against Animal Family Members', which mentioned that the results of a major Australian study were currently in press. I am delighted to say that 'The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse: An Australian Study' by Volant, A.M., Johnson, J.A., Gullone, E., & Coleman, G.J. has now been published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (Vol 23 No 9 pp 1277-95, <http://online.sagepub.com>).

Before discussing this research I would like to give you a bit of the history that led to this study. For many years all of us who worked in the field were aware that women escaping domestic violence were concerned about their pet animals left at home. But the problem was never addressed. In 1998 the Eastern Domestic Violence Outreach Service (EDVOS) attempted to establish a foster care program for pets but unfortunately it had a disastrous start when the first pet to be sheltered died from injuries previously inflicted by the perpetrator. We then decided that the animals needed to be housed with an animal welfare organisation rather than in a volunteer fostering program. But we had to demonstrate that there was a need for a Pet Program.

I decided to do a pilot study of women living in refuges in Victoria during July 2001. Of the 28 respondents 84% reported currently having a pet. Forty-four percent stated that their partner had killed or hurt their pets, a further 66% confirmed that there had been threats and 48% of women said that concern for their animals' welfare

was a major factor in their delay in seeking safety in a refuge. These results mirrored the findings of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) who had surveyed a group of women staying in shelters in Ontario.

The EDVOS pilot survey led to a partnership with Associate Professor Eleonora Gullone at Monash University. Professor Grahame Coleman later joined the authors in exploring the relationship between domestic violence and animal abuse.

Anne Volant conducted this research as part of her graduate studies in psychology at Monash University. Two groups of participants were recruited, a domestic violence group and a non-domestic violence control group.

Inclusion criteria for participants in the domestic violence group of 102 women required that participants be accessing a domestic violence support agency (refuge or outreach service) and that they currently had a pet, or had had a pet during their most recent abusive relationship. The second group, the community sample also of 102 women, required participants to have had at least one pet during their current or most recent relationship, which did not include domestic violence.

Anne conducted the telephone interviews and compiled the data detailing the stories of violence. The women had been assured that their stories were confidential to this particular research project and therefore would not be made available to other researchers. The data was held by Anne for the required period and has now been

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destroyed. Our promise to the women and their domestic violence workers has been kept.

In brief, I can tell you that the study found that 53% of the women in violent relationships had pets hurt or killed compared with 0% in the community sample. In answer to the question 'Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?', 46% of the women in the domestic violence group said that their pets had been threatened compared with 6% in the community sample.

As with North American and Canadian studies, the Australian data demonstrates a significant and strong link between domestic violence and animal abuse. Only 33 women, living in crisis accommodation at the time of interview were asked if they had delayed leaving because of concern for their pet's welfare. Eleven women said that they had delayed seeking safety and in most instances had waited for more than eight weeks.

Some years ago, when trying to work out what to do about the pets, we realised that as well as trying to find housing for women and their children we now had to house their animals as well. The penny dropped! Why not remove the perpetrator instead? EDVOS embarked in this new direction, with funding from DHS, to pursue the presumption that some women could safely remain in the home if the perpetrator is removed. Many women have chosen this option. As you are now aware it has become part of social policy in addressing domestic violence.

Given the increasing awareness of the link between domestic violence and animal abuse it is marvellous to have pet abuse included as an indicator of violence in the Risk Assessment Framework. Another

major development has been the inclusion of animal abuse in the new Family Violence Protection Act 2008. Family violence now includes the following behaviour: 'causing or threatening to cause the death of, or injury to, an animal, whether or not the animal belongs to the family member to whom the behaviour is directed so as to control, dominate or coerce the family member'. It follows on that it is a condition included in a family violence intervention order – 'prohibiting the respondent from damaging the protected person's property, including an animal'.

In August 2006, Frank Ascione, Professor of Psychology at Utah State University in the US joined us in launching the Pets in Peril Program. EDVOS, together with Animal Aid, provide a sheltering program for the pets of women who have to leave their homes. Any woman in the Eastern region who is escaping domestic violence can contact EDVOS on 9870 5939 and utilise this resource. When a woman is en route to a DV service she may decide, on the advice of EDVOS, to leave her pet with a local vet clinic. There is an undercover network of veterinary clinics that will accept and house a pet for 24 hours, free of charge, when contacted by EDVOS. Animal Aid will then be notified of the whereabouts of the pet and will collect the animal for boarding at their shelter.

The Pets in Peril Program, Lort Smith Animal Hospital and EDVOS were involved in the 'Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse' segment by Lisa Whitehead for the *7.30 Report* on the ABC. It was a joint winner of an EVA (Eliminating Family Violence Media Awards) for the Best Television Current Affairs (less than 20 minutes). It was marvellous to have this issue exposed to such a wide audience.