

Commentary

The Growing Field of Veterinary Forensics: Who is Teaching it, Where is it Headed, and Why Should You Care

Given the rapid expansion of forensic sciences there are likely several nascent areas that are off your radar, and maybe that includes veterinary forensics. While those working in law and medicine may see the applied science of forensics as “relatively new and still lacking uniform regulation or guidance” (1), there is a clear argument to be made that ‘veterinary forensics’ is truly in its infancy. The field, loosely defined, relates to the forensic examination of animals, live or dead, but, as with human medicolegal investigations, it overlaps with many applied sciences. The following briefly touches on current veterinary forensic education and training and highlights the need for attention and support from organizations like the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

At the time of this writing, specific curricular requirements addressing forensic examination do not exist in accredited veterinary schools in the United States. While the medicolegal community should have no expectation that veterinary practitioners can apply their specialized veterinary knowledge to forensics cases without additional training, the who, what, and where around such additional training is far from clear or consistent. Veterinary practitioners have sought specialized training through university programs that offer Master of Science degrees, and various institutional externships, certificate programs, seminars, and organization conferences, but the lack of uniformity across these opportunities can bring expertise and credentials into question. Very recently, the American College of Veterinary Pathologists (ACVP) supported the formation of a Veterinary Forensic Pathology Fellowship Program, which will provide post-residency training in veterinary forensic pathology (VFP). This training opportunity construct is like that offered in the human medical subspecialty of forensic pathology. While not part of any accreditation requirements, veterinary forensics is also making its way into some veterinary school curricula. Individual courses, typically offered as electives, and content incorporated into standardized and required courses such as veterinary pathology are often the routes by which veterinary students are first exposed to forensics topics. Content may include and is not limited to federal and state laws, expert witness testimony, scene investigation, evidence handling, and medical examinations of live and deceased patients. Expanding training within veterinary curricula may be warranted given a growing list of states with mandatory reporting requirements for veterinary practitioners. Veterinary

graduates need, at a minimum, to have an awareness of state laws around animal neglect and cruelty, but implicit in these requirements is an ability to recognize the signs of neglect and abuse, thus there is an increasing need for training around forensic case management.

At this point you may be asking why the development of veterinary forensic education is important to the wider forensic community. The answer is in the integrated nature of humans and animals. In the United States pet ownership is incredibly common. In 2022 there were 131.2 million U.S. households (2), and an estimated 62 million of them had one or more dogs, and 37 million had one or more cats (3). Approximately half of US households have a dog or cat, and approximately 69% of US adults have children (4). Given this level of human and animal cohabitation, it is not surprising to find that there is an overlap in animal, child, and intimate partner violence. Failures to recognize animals as victims and sources of evidence negatively impact a wide variety of criminal investigations. In addition to cases of domestic abuse and violence, poaching, illegal trade, smuggling, blood sports, neglect, and sociopsychological conditions such as animal hoarding can be integrated into the caseload of a forensic veterinarian. The breadth of veterinary forensics is likely underestimated by the forensics community because when these cases become trace evidence, or a crime scene or ballistics investigation the association with the animal may be lost.

Within veterinary medicine there is an increasing awareness of the role veterinary forensic training can play in management and interpretation of scenes, collection and handling of evidence, and live and postmortem animal examinations, which is driving expansion and improvement in veterinary forensic training within veterinary curricula and within postgraduate and subspecialty training programs. Increased interest and interaction from practitioners in the wider forensic sciences community, particularly through contributions to the design and execution of these educational opportunities, will help to ensure this nascent field develops uniform practices and procedures and incorporates scientific rigor contemporaneously with other recognized areas of forensic science.

References

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