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# The Veterinary Forensic Expert Centre in The Netherlands

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## Abstract

Animal abuse remains a major problem in human societies. Sometimes the signs of animal abuse are obvious, but they are often missed by veterinarians. Animals may have no external signs of physical damage, but can have many internal injuries, fractures, and haemorrhages. Animals often act as indicators of human health and welfare, as can be seen in the link between animal abuse, child abuse, and social violence. There is significant evidence that people who mistreat and abuse animals show the same behaviour towards vulnerable people around them, such as children or older adults.

Colleagues in human medicine, including doctors, dentists, and other healthcare professionals, face the same dilemma as veterinarians in that it can be very difficult to detect violence and abuse. They also acknowledge that the biggest challenge to recognizing and diagnosing abuse is the powerful emotional block in the mind of the professional. They must force themselves to think about abuse in the first place; only by recognizing the problem can the veterinary profession become a part of the link to break the cycle of violence.

To help veterinarians detect animal abuse, the Veterinary Forensic Expert Centre (VFEC) was set up in the Netherlands with several objectives. The first objective is

to help practicing veterinarians who believe that they may have a case of animal abuse in their practice. The veterinarian can upload radiographs, pictures, videos, and written information regarding an animal onto the VFEC website. An expert panel of specialized veterinarians, along with human forensic experts from the Dutch Forensic Institute (NFI), will assess the material and inform the veterinarian within 48 hours whether this could be a potential case of animal abuse or not. If it could be, the veterinarian can pass the information to the police, who will then undertake further inquiries. The second objective is to undertake scientific research on veterinary forensics. The third objective is to educate veterinarians, human doctors, psychologists, social workers and the general public about animal abuse and its relationship to domestic violence.

Veterinarians, together with other health professionals, play a crucial role in the prevention and discovery of animal abuse and domestic violence. Increased education and better awareness in this area, along with improved co-operation with other professions, can help address this problem and assist a reduction in unnecessary suffering for both animals and humans.