

## The ongoing impact of domestic violence on animal welfare

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**Abstract:** *A study of five women who had left violent relationships six months previously was undertaken to elicit information on the importance of companion animals during the violence and subsequent period. The questions focused on the women's experiences of companion animal ownership during domestic violence, incidents of animal abuse/neglect, animals' behavioural changes, experiences of veterinarians as a source of support and perpetrators' use of human/animal directed violence. We found that (1) companion animal behavioural changes persisted after the violent relationship, (2) perpetrators selectively controlled their violent behaviour and (3) veterinarians were not considered useful sources of support by all women interviewed. To address these issues we recommend that veterinarians are educated in the best ways to offer support in cases of domestic violence co-occurring to companion animals.*

**Keywords:** *domestic violence; animal abuse; animal behaviour; veterinarians*

## Introduction

‘When we’re at our downest and we’re sitting on the stairs crying, who happens to be sitting beside us? The dog. I do believe that pets are therapy in themselves.’ (Deanna)

Since the 1990s, research has shown that animals are vulnerable to abuse in domestic violence situations as part of the perpetrator’s power and control tactics (e.g. Adams; Faver and Strand; Quinlisk). Frank Ascione defines animal abuse or cruelty as ‘socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering or distress to and/or death of an animal’ (228). This has serious animal welfare implications as high levels of animal abuse have been reported where there is known domestic violence (Ascione, Weber, Thompson, Heath, Maruyama and Hayashi; Volant, Johnson, Gullone and Coleman). However, little attention has been focused on the ongoing health and welfare effects on the animals. While the prevalence of animal abuse in domestic violence situations is largely unknown, animal exposure to violence in the home is likely to be high because 63% of Australian households live with companion animals (Animal Health Alliance) and one in three women experience domestic violence (World Health Organisation).

The purpose of this paper is to report on the ongoing impact of animal welfare and behaviour after being in a domestic violence situation, using data from a study of women in Australia who were originally interviewed in the immediate period after leaving the violent relationship and who had had animals in their care during their relationship. During the study the women were interviewed a second time after six months and were asked to reflect on the health and welfare of their companion animals during the six months after separation from a domestic violence relationship and issues such as relocating to safe accommodation. In addition, the women’s views of support services for their companion animals (fostering and veterinary care) were explored.

Long before the subject gained academic attention, anecdotal reports emerged from domestic violence workers that animals were also being victimised within the context of domestic violence. In response, in the 1970s feminist animal advocate Carol J. Adams founded a helpline for abused women in the USA and documented examples of how animal abuse was used by domestic violence perpetrators to establish control over women (65). Adams's research revealed that:

*Battering* is one form of human male sexual violence that victimizes women, children and animals. Threats and abuse (often fatal) of pets by a woman's sexual partner occur in his attempts to establish control. (65)

People often regard their companion animals as members of the family (Albert and Bulcroft), but in domestic violence situations women and animals share a particularly strong emotional bond (Flynn). In such circumstances, abuse of the animals has a similar psychological impact on a woman as if she were being abused herself (Ganley). Such animal abuse is not a random event; animals targeted for abuse within domestic violence are more likely to be either the companion animal of the victimised woman or of particular emotional significance to her (Roguski; Tiplady, Walsh and Phillips). In addition, Roguski has identified that animal cruelty is often prevalent both during the relationship and after separation, for the purposes of maintenance of power and control, and punishment for leaving, respectively. Thus, the violence to animals is both purposive and instrumental (Warshaw, Ganley and Salber; Langlands, Ward and Gilchrist).

### Impact on animals living with domestic violence

Several studies have documented the types of abuse inflicted on animals living in a domestic violence situation (Carlisle-Frank, Frank and Nielsen; Roguski; Tiplady, Walsh and Phillips). These may cause serious injuries, suffering and death and include: punching, hitting, choking, drowning, shooting, stabbing (Carlisle-Frank and Flanagan); kicking, beating, throwing, hanging, poisoning, decapitation, deliberate neglect, verbal abuse (Tiplady, Walsh and Phillips); shaking, igniting (Ascione, 'Battered Women'); sexual abuse (Roguski); and deliberately driving over an animal and burying it alive (Flynn). Living with domestic violence is traumatic to

animals, as indicated by the stress and anxiety-related behaviour reported to occur during domestic violent events (e.g. running away, aggression toward the perpetrator, seeking proximity to the victimised partner) (Tiplady, Walsh and Phillips). However, we are not aware of any published research reporting on ongoing behavioural changes in animals after exposure to violence or after directly experiencing it.

Concern for the wellbeing of companion animals is a key reason why some women delay leaving their violent partner (Ascione, Weber and Wood; Ascione, 'Battered Women', Flynn; Carlisle-Frank, Frank and Nielsen; Ascione, Weber, Thompson, Heath, Maruyama and Hayashi). Although not all perpetrators of domestic violence abuse animals, it has been observed that those who do so tend to use more dangerous forms of violence and controlling behaviours towards their partners (Simmons and Lehmann). As a result, animal abuse is considered a 'red flag' for potentially high levels of human interpersonal violence in a household (Ascione, Weber and Wood; Flynn).

### Veterinarians and Domestic Violence

Many women remain silent about animal abuse in domestic violence and are reluctant to confide in veterinarians (Tiplady, Walsh and Phillips). Despite veterinarians being trained in animal health and welfare and well-situated to act as sentinels (Arkow and Munro), in particular through identifying cases of animal abuse, they receive little training in this issue in preparation for practice (Landau). Because of the connections between animal and human domestic violence, veterinarians may also be in a good position to suspect human abuse when they are confronted with animal abuse cases. However, a survey of veterinarians in Indiana, USA, found that only 7% reported that they had received training in the management of animal abuse and none reported having received training in how to deal with cases of human interpersonal violence (Landau). Studies in New Zealand (Williams, Dale, Clarke and Garrett) and Australia (Green and Gullone) have confirmed that only 13% of veterinarians feel they have the necessary resources to offer help (e.g. referral advice) in cases of human interpersonal violence and only a

small minority (estimated at 7%, Green and Gullone, and 15%, Williams, Dale, Clarke and Garrett) believe that veterinary schools provide adequate training in animal abuse prevention.

## Research Method

The objective of this study was to identify the ongoing impact on behaviour and welfare of companion animals who had been exposed to a domestic violence relationship. Women were initially recruited through a 24 hour crisis telephone service (DVConnect) which provided the intake to women's shelters in Queensland, Australia. At the conclusion of an initial survey (Tiplady, Walsh and Phillips, in press), women were offered the opportunity to provide consent to be contacted by the researcher for a further interview in six months' time. A semi-structured telephone survey interview was used as this is consistent with research with other vulnerable populations (Ellsberg and Heise).

The initial telephone interview had found that eight of the 13 women recruited reported that companion animals had also been abused/neglected. Common behavioural changes observed in those animals included aggression toward the partner and protectiveness of the victimised woman. The follow-up study also used qualitative telephone interviews. The study was designed to explore how the affected animals' behaviour had changed over time since the first interview and to hear women's experiences and reflections of domestic violence and the perpetrator's use of violence. Further, women were asked to comment on their bond with their animal(s) and support available for their animals. We considered that interviewing women at approximately six months after leaving their abusive partner would be the most appropriate time to test whether short-term behavioural changes had dissipated and ongoing entrenched behaviour change had become established in the animals.

A thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within data by following the six methodological phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes,

defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The survey interviews were conducted at times convenient to the women, were tape-recorded with their consent and transcribed verbatim. Anonymity was protected by changing all names during transcription. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Queensland Ethical Review Committee prior to commencing this follow-up study (approval number: 2011001096).

The following screening questions were asked: whether any animals were still 'owned' by or living with the women and whether the woman had left her partner. Questions were also asked about use of the Pets in Crisis companion animal fostering service provided by the domestic violence service (DVConnect) in conjunction with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). (In Queensland, this service provides up to 28 days of foster care of companion animals for a nominal fee. Veterinary examinations are conducted prior to fostering and additional services, such as desexing (spaying and neutering), are available at a low price.)

Although 11 of the 13 women from the initial survey consented to be contacted for the follow-up survey, only five of these were able to be contacted six months after the initial interview. Reasons for women not participating after initially expressing interest were impossible to determine; however, we speculate that it is most likely that some women had changed their telephone number for security reasons or had returned to their partner.

Generalisation of the results from this study to all animals in domestic violence situations would be unwise until further confirmatory studies are published, due to both our recruitment strategy and small sample size. Another limitation of the study was that women self-selected to participate and were recruited through a crisis service, and therefore they may not have been representative of all women with companion animals who experience domestic violence.

## The survey

The survey (a copy of which is available from Catherine Tiplady) comprised several topics: behavioural changes in animals which had lived with domestic violence; support from veterinarians and animal foster care services; perpetrators' behaviour towards other humans and animals; and the impact of domestic violence on the womens' bond with their animals. Demographic details had been gathered in the initial survey. Time was allowed for the women to elaborate on any issues important to them regarding domestic violence and companion animals at the conclusion of the interview. Direct quotations from the interviews with the women are reported with our additions in italics.

## Participants and Animals

Five women participated in the current study: Deanna, Linda, Angela, Trish and Kelly-Anne (pseudonyms). All were born in Australia, with one, Linda, identifying as an Indigenous Australian. Their age range at interview was 43-50 years. All had reported domestic violence perpetrated by male partners, with children being present at some stage during the domestic violence. The demographic and contextual details of the five women are as follows:

### Deanna

Deanna, a 44-year old woman, had been in a relationship with her partner (a 49-year old man) for 10 years. She had partially completed high school and at the time of the interview was not in the paid workforce. Deanna owned and lived with two dogs during the relationship – a female, five-year old Maltese Terrier and a female, three-year old Kelpie x Australian Cattle Dog. Deanna reported that while neither animal experienced physical abuse nor neglect, the Kelpie x Australian Cattle Dog was verbally abused. The Pets in Crisis foster care program was accessed for her Maltese Terrier (for three months) and her Kelpie x Australian Cattle Dog was fostered by a family member while she was in refuge.

### Linda

Linda, a 43-year old woman, had been in a sporadic relationship with her partner, a 40-year old man, for 16 years. She had partially completed high school and was not in paid employment. Linda lived with four female dogs (a two-year old Maltese terrier; an elderly Maltese Terrier x Shih Tzu; a 10-year old Dachshund and a five-year old Dachshund) and a three-year old female shorthaired cat during this relationship. Linda used Pets in Crisis fostering for her Maltese Terrier for one month; the other animals were left with her ex-partner.

### Angela

Angela, a 46 year old woman, was reporting on a previous violent relationship experienced prior to a recent period of homelessness. The relationship she described lasted for two years with a 45 year old man. Angela had completed high school but was not in paid employment. During the relationship Angela owned a mixed breed male cat, who was 2 years old when the relationship ended. Angela took him with her when she left the relationship.

### Trish

Trish, a 43-year old woman, had been with a 42-year old man for 14 years. Trish was not in paid employment; had partially completed high school and had a trade qualification. Trish had two companion animals, a male 10-month old Cairn Terrier and a three-year old female Birman cat. Trish had placed her dog in Pets in Crisis foster care for 28 days before deciding to allow the RSPCA to rehome him. The cat remained with her partner until Trish returned home six months later to regain possession of the house and resume care of the cat.

### Kelly-Anne

Kelly-Anne, a 50-year old woman, had been in a relationship with a 50-year old man for 10 months. Kelly-Anne had a Nursing qualification but at the time of the interview was on leave

from paid employment. During the relationship she lived with her own companion animals (two female cats aged 12 and 13 years and two male Quarrion birds aged 8 and 13 years). Her partner also owned companion animals in the household, an 8-year old female German Shepherd, two female cats aged eight and 10 years and a male Quarrion bird aged four years. Kelly-Anne placed her two cats and two birds in Pets in Crisis foster care for a month; however, the birds were initially housed with her in a women's shelter.

## Results

The major themes to emerge from the interviews included the impact of the abuse, selective targeting of a particular animal for abuse, the emotional bond between women and animals and use of support (e.g. veterinary care, fostering) for animals.

### Impact of the abuse

Three of the five women (Angela, Trish and Kelly-Anne) reported that animals had been directly physically abused, and one woman, Deanna, reported verbal animal abuse. Linda's partner did not directly abuse the animals; however, she reported that when her partner verbally abused her the female Maltese Terrier would demonstrate distress by barking continuously at the partner.

Angela explained how her cat would be abused for walking near her partner or for vocalising at him:

You know, like if he was walking and the cat was, you know, walking near him or walked in front of him he'd kick him out of the way. That sort of thing. Sometimes when we were arguing the cat wouldn't disappear, he'd sort of be there and be sort of very upset and he'd be growling, you know, because he was obviously stressed out and everything else and if the cat did that he'd go to kick him or do something to him then as well.

In Trish's case, both her cat and dog were verbally abused and neglected by her partner during the relationship. After she left the relationship her ex-partner found where she was living and threw her dog over the fence causing abrasions on the dog. After leaving the relationship, Trish was very concerned about the welfare of her cat whom her ex-partner had refused to relinquish to her. (The week after the survey was completed Trish was due to return home and resume care of the cat):

The neighbours tell me the cat's being a bit neglected, well, um, you know, he feeds her and stuff but . . . he just lets her wander all around and she like lies in the middle of the road and you know (sighs) stuff like that and I doubt that she's been to the vet and had her vaccinations or anything.

Kelly-Anne described how her ex-partner's abusive behaviour could also affect her cat and her children:

If he was angry and wasn't coping and the cat just happened to, say, jump up on the desk, it got flipped off. So, dependant on his levels of stresses and anger at the time was how he would, you know, like if it was the kids in his way they'd cop it (= *be abused*), if it was me in the way, I would, but if it just happened to be an animal, they would, you know, like the dog would get kicked at or screamed at for no reason.

Deanna's partner used unpredictable, intermittent verbal abuse to confuse her Kelpie x Australian Cattle Dog. He would call the dog inside the house (where she wasn't allowed to be), patting and cuddling her and then shout at her in an abusive tone to get out of the house.

Behavioural changes in animals whilst living with domestic violence were reported by all five women. In most cases, the behaviours had become less severe and/or less frequent since leaving the violent partner. However, some animals continued to show behavioural changes when confronted with certain stimuli six months after the relationship had ended and women felt that this behaviour was now entrenched.

The animals belonging to Deanna and Angela maintained a fear of men beyond the end of the violent relationship. Deanna states:

Let's put it this way, I trust her (the Kelpie X Australian Cattle Dog), like I can walk her down the street and everything, you know and she's a lovely obedient dog but I don't have 100% faith in her if a male was walking the opposite way (compared) to if a female was (walking by).

Angela's experiences involved a similar situation, in which her cat continued to dislike men even after Angela had left the violent partner:

He (the cat) seemed a lot more relaxed when I moved (out of the violent home). He didn't like males from then on though. If he heard a male voice, even if my father or you know, brothers or whatever came, if he heard a male voice he would go and hide, any male friends that visited, he would hide. He ended up being a female-only cat.

The distrust of men appears to have become generalised as Angela explains:

When I did have one boyfriend, we had an argument and there was, you know, raised voices during the argument, it wasn't a domestic violence situation, I mean, everyone argues. But yeah, he (the cat) was very, um... skittish and just, I don't know, he wasn't vicious but just very nervy (*anxious*) for a few days afterwards... You'd just walk up to him and put your hand on him and he'd jump, even though he knew you were coming.

When Kelly-Anne left her violent partner she took her birds with her to a women's refuge until companion animal fostering could be arranged. She describes the birds' reactions to being away from the violent household:

I took them with me to a women's shelter and they would sing so much! They hadn't sung for 7-10 months, they were so happy! I had to move them into another room because they were so noisy.

Kelly-Anne's cats are 'back to normal, more or less', eating well and no longer fighting since they left the violent partner and relocated to a youth accommodation service where she is manager, but when certain conditions are present the cats still react. Kelly-Anne notes:

The only thing I notice with the cats is when we have the youth in here and they bring their mates home, and remember they're street kids and they're loud and they're obnoxious, they (the cats) hide, they run away from them and hide.

Trish's dog, Jack, (a male Cairn Terrier X) had become aggressive whilst living with Trish's violent partner and received behavioural rehabilitation by RSPCA staff during his time in foster care with them. Trish hesitantly explains:

Unfortunately I couldn't keep Jack where I've been staying and he had to be rehomed and the RSPCA looked after him and rehabilitated him a bit because he became a bit snappy and bitey (= *aggressive*) from being with (ex-partner).

The decision to relinquish Jack was difficult for Trish but she kept in regular contact with the RSPCA to check how he was settling into his new home. Trish was pleased with his new owner:

The lady who took him is, you know, a mature lady so he'll be her companion and she doesn't work so they're together all the time and apparently she's quite comfortable financially so I don't think he'll want for anything... (*laughs*) So, I think he's done better than us!

In all of the situations reported here the behavioural changes were observed by the women to persist well beyond the exposure to the abuse and violence had ended.

### Selective targeting

Women reported that the abusive partner selectively used violent behaviour and much of the violence was hidden from public view. The ability of perpetrators of domestic violence to use abusive behaviour selectively is illustrated by Kelly-Anne's experiences:

They're very clever at hiding it to their friends and outside people. It's only when they're in a close relationship that you happen to see it... they're like chameleons, they hide it, so that's why when you separate, people are so shocked and astounded and then they (the ex-partners) play the victim...

This next example demonstrates that violence can be used or controlled when the situation warrants it. Kelly-Anne describes the build-up of tension exhibited by her partner prior to a domestic violence event:

He didn't cope with every-day, normal stresses. So, what would happen is you would watch the pressure build up and then like a volcano the valve was ready to go off. ... And you'd think 'Any minute'. And you'd try and stay out of his way and tell your kids 'Stay out of his way' and you were waiting for the explosion and it could be anything, anything, once that valve was ready to go, it was Bang! Whoever was there – animals, kids, me would cop it (= *be abused*). But he could control it, because you know, if somebody turned up he'd switch back.

Trish's ex-partner was a police officer, and she stated that in his work he would 'quite often flog people, like, hit them'. Trish explains how he would also be cruel to his mother's dog:

It was a little dog, so he'd pick it up and throw it in the pond. Or he'd chase it, you know, frighten it and chase it and it just hated him, it absolutely hated him and he knew it so he would then do his best to intimidate the dog.

Linda reported her partner had perpetrated abuse toward her and other people outside the family but had not abused any animals directly. However, witnessing the abusive behaviour towards Linda had a profound effect on one of her dogs.

### Emotional bond

All the women in this survey reported that the shared experience of domestic violence had made them closer to their animals and talked about how much their animals meant to them. Three women referred to their animals as their children and the other two women highlighted the importance of their impression of unconditional love generated by the animals. Angela captures the sentiment:

The... oh... Unconditional love! Unconditional love both ways – you know, me for him, him for me, it was just, there was no conditions. You didn't have to bow and scrape (= *be submissive*), you didn't have to follow rules or anything else like that, it's just unconditional love.

The emotional bond between the women and their animals generated a range of protective behaviours that had a number of potential consequences for their own safety. Four of the women delayed leaving their abusive partner due to concerns that the animals were at risk of abuse or neglect. Kelly-Anne, Deanna and Trish each delayed leaving by six months and Angela delayed leaving by 12 months. Linda did not have concerns for her animals left in the care of her ex-partner.

Kelly-Anne explained how concern for her animals prevented her from leaving the violent relationship earlier:

I think you were always on guard ... and thinking 'Keep them out of his way' and so you were over-vigilant to try and protect them, sort of thing. And you felt trapped, like 'How am I gonna (*going to*) get out of here, I've got two animals, I've got nowhere to go, what am I gonna do?' and that was one of the reasons as well why I stayed because I thought 'I don't want to lose my animals'. That's why a lot of people stay in that relationship because if they leave they sometimes can't take their animals with them.

The emotional bond between women and their animals was important on several counts, including as a source of comfort and as valued companions. In some cases, due to this bond, women made protective decisions that prioritised the animals' wellbeing over their own.

### Support services for animals

The women were asked about the support services available to their animals and what sort of service they found most helpful. Four of the five women had used the Pets in Crisis animal

fostering service and all of these reported positive experiences of this service, Trish stating, 'They (the RSPCA) were just so helpful and it made it not as traumatic for me'.

Both Deanna and Linda were impressed that their animals received such a high level of veterinary care when being placed through the RSPCA animal fostering service with Linda commenting: 'She got thoroughly checked out and you know, looked at and [de]fleaded and wormed and whatever they needed to do when she went into um, the RSPCA.'

The domestic violence workers who referred Trish to the RSPCA animal fostering service were invaluable because she didn't know what to do with her dog Jack as she was trying to flee domestic violence. She recounts:

I was crying because I didn't know what to do with Jack, you know and I couldn't tend him where I was and you know, she (the domestic violence worker) was the one who just straight up (*immediately*) had all the information, she had the lady's name, the lady's phone number, she said 'Give this lady at the RSPCA a call, they have a program'... She knew all about it and that was just fabulous and then I rang them (RSPCA) and they were just straight on the ball and ... didn't just leave me hanging.

Finding suitable housing for themselves and the animals after leaving the violent relationship was a problem raised by Deanna who felt that her dogs were all she and her children had left:

When we first moved into the house here we were under the understanding that we were allowed the dogs but then the real estate (agent) said, after me having them back for three weeks, that we weren't allowed to have the dogs, so that ... just ripped the blanket out from under (= *demoralised*) us.

In all of the situations reported here the women felt the support from the fostering service was critical, but once they sought independent accommodation the support for animals was limited. They reported that it was difficult to find rental accommodation which would allow companion animals.

The women's responses were diverse when asked how veterinarians could assist the animals and people who live in domestic violence situations, but all overwhelmingly agreed that veterinarians should know about and recognise domestic violence in their practice. Kelly-Anne suggested that veterinarians could prescribe medications to decrease animals' stress, but she also had ethical concerns regarding animals remaining in violent homes:

That's not the answer, they're your pets, you need to get out (*leave the home*) for yourself and for your animals because, you know, it not only affects you, it does affect your animals. The only answer is to get out.

Angela similarly mentioned products to decrease anxiety in companion animals, however she added: 'I don't like even saying this because the best solution is to get out of that situation.'

Trish saw limitations to how veterinarians can assist as she felt it was outside their professional role. In contrast, Linda thought that veterinarians could be helpful by offering check-ups for animals living with domestic violence, explaining that 'Sometimes they (the animals) get neglected because of what's going on in the house...'

Deanna was unsure whether veterinarians could help, stating 'I'm not too sure, I mean, I don't think psychologically, no, I don't think a vet could' but also mentioned that offering discounted neutering for companion animals in domestic violence homes would be of assistance financially.

In summary, women were generally positive about the immediate practical support from the RSPCA/DV Connect Pets in Crisis which provided care of animals whilst they accessed emergency accommodation. Finding private rental housing which allowed animals was apparently not easy. Some women felt that private-practice veterinarians were limited in their ability to provide support and assistance in situations of domestic violence.

## Discussion

The major themes to emerge from the interviews included the impact of the abuse, selective targeting of a particular animal for abuse, the emotional bond between women and animals and use of veterinary care and fostering as support for animals.

There was an ongoing impact on the behaviour of animals which persisted after the exposure to the violence and abuse had ceased. Some of the observed behaviour changes included seeking proximity to the woman owner, indicating that the animal remained anxious, and, in some cases, animals demonstrating a fear of men which appeared to be generalised. Behavioural rehabilitation was provided to one animal (a dog), resulting in his being successfully rehomed. A fear of men may have implications for the animal's ability to settle into a foster home that includes men, to cope with male veterinary staff and animal attendants, or to feel comfortable with any male relatives, friends or future male intimate partners of the abused woman or her children.

Overall, the current study showed that exposure to domestic violence can have ongoing impact on animals' emotions, especially an enhanced level of fear and anxiety. The ongoing difficulties that animals exhibited were either the result of being abused directly or being exposed to domestic violence. Animal abuse is a traumatic event causing fear and helplessness in animals and in many cases ongoing (longer than one month) behavioural changes (Day and Day).

Selective use of violence and abuse by the male perpetrators in our study was consistent with other studies that report that domestic violence is used both to maintain power and control over women while in the relationship and as revenge for leaving following separation (Roguski; Shepard and Pence). The majority of these abusive behaviours were inside the confines of the intimate relationship when there were no witnesses present, confirming that perpetrators are in control of their behaviour.

Domestic violence may be perpetrated at varying frequencies. Whilst some women experience it daily, others experience it infrequently, interspersed with kind, caring behaviours

(Mahoney, Williams and West). Intermittency and unpredictability of abusive behaviours is a common feature in some domestic violence situations, increasing the fear response in victims (Dutton); an unpredictability which, as described in the current study, can be extended toward companion animals. Unpredictability of stressors can cause animals to experience chronic fear and anxiety (Griffin and Hume), which in turn causes poor physical and mental wellbeing (Casey).

Consistent with other research, women in this study were clearly closely bonded to their companion animals and all but one had delayed leaving a violent relationship due to fears for the animals' wellbeing (Flynn; Simmons and Lehman; Ascione). Women also commented on how difficult it was to find rental accommodation that allowed tenants to live with companion animals, so support for animals was limited to the services surrounding crisis accommodation. Hence women with companion animals may be exposed to continuing violence if they remain in the relationship or risk homelessness if they leave. Being separated from animals during the fostering period was also seen as stressful. Unlike women's shelters in the USA (Phillips), very few shelters in Australia allow animals to be housed on-site.

Support for animals, such as the Pets in Crisis companion animal fostering program, was viewed positively by all the women, indicating that this is a valuable service for those escaping from domestic violence. The opportunity to have animals checked for their health, neutered, microchipped and vaccinated at low cost by the RSPCA veterinarians was also valued and appeared to reduce the concerns women had about the health and wellbeing of their animals.

Women's opinions about veterinarians as a source of support for human and animal victims of violence were varied. Overwhelmingly, women indicated that knowledge of domestic violence and the implications for animals and women were critical for effective veterinary support, but they would not confide in veterinarians as part of seeking help. Ways in which veterinarians could assist included providing discounted veterinary care for companion animals from violent homes (e.g. neutering and check-ups). Independent private practice veterinarians were seen as a less valuable source of support than the domestic violence workers and RSPCA

staff involved in the foster program. RSPCA shelter veterinarians performed health checks and any necessary veterinary procedures for all animals received for fostering.

## Recommendations for action

As a result of the findings, we have three recommendations for further research that will compliment this current research and increase our knowledge in this area.

That there be a more widespread longitudinal study to measure and monitor the longer-term impact of exposure to domestic violence on animals to see if the behaviours observed at six months are widely observed and persist past six months.

1. That research is undertaken to explore the most appropriate rehabilitation processes for animals exposed to domestic violence so that the long-term impact of abuse is reduced.
2. That research is undertaken to explore if the safe housing of animals on site in women's refuges or in private rental accommodation improves outcomes for women, children and their companion animals.

## Conclusions

This study is the first to determine the ongoing impact of domestic violence on companion animal welfare and behaviour, the selective targeting of abuse; how the emotional bond between women and their animals renders them vulnerable and women's perceptions of support services for their animals. The impact of domestic violence on the lives of animals was profound and long-lasting in the current study.

Women and companion animals appeared to share a close emotional bond that was a mutual source of support during and after the end of the violent relationship. For this reason, housing women and animals together post-separation and offering behavioural and veterinary rehabilitation and care are important to improve animal and human wellbeing outcomes. Private

practice veterinarians were not considered useful sources of support by all the women interviewed however work undertaken by shelter veterinarians on animals entering foster care was deemed to be valuable.

Domestic violence is a complex issue in which companion animals are an integral part: as victims of direct abuse; used as a means for gaining power and control and as a source of emotional support to women. For women escaping from domestic violence, restricted access to rental accommodation which accepts companion animals is an additional source of stress.

This paper confirms Carol J. Adams's argument that 'women's oppression is interwoven with that of animals' (70). Acknowledging the importance of animals in the lives of women recovering from abuse is essential for the development of strategies to educate veterinary and domestic violence workers in how to best collaborate to support the animal and human survivors of abuse.

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